

## Author's notes

Wow! As I write those words, I just finished writing this fanfiction. It's HUGE! I promised I wouldn't post the first chapter before I finished it all. That way, I was sure to complete it. I was tempted to post it in a Oneshot. But I don't know if fanfictiondotnet takes text files over 1 Mo. Oh yeah, prepare to get in a long ride. That's going to give me time to work on my Naruto fic.

So here we go! In this, Harry follow Hermione out of the Divination course at the same time as her. Having to take another course to replace it, he somewhat end up in Ancient Runes, where he discover himself an unexpected talent. Smarter Harry, with a small manipulative strike. Have fun!

## Secondary Author Note

Guess what? I just killed my laptop! All the 287 pages of the Word document were in it!

Lucky us, I managed to get the hard drive at the computer shop and got the data. We are so lucky. If I had lost this, it would have been the end of fanfiction. To lose so much work in one fall...

## IMPORTANT NOTE

In this story, Rune isn't an ordinary elective course. It can be taken from second year onward because of the difficulty of the course. Of course, Hermione did so. Oh yeah. Bathshed Babbling is the name of the MALE rune teacher in my fic. I don't care if he's a she in the God's Book of Definition of Gender: in here, it's a man. Thanks you.

## Disclaimer:

This work of fanfiction is based on the novel of J.K Rowling and will be pulled back as soon as she find out I did so. I'm that evil.

"Enough of this nonsense! Maybe my aura is thin, but it's more consistent than your predictions!"

After that particularly loud proclamation, Hermione Granger, third year Gryffindor at Hogwarts, got up, grabbed her schoolbag and moved toward the exit. Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter were speechless. Hermione, verbally flipping off a teacher, what was the world coming to? Harry sent a sideways look toward his divination teacher, Professor Trelawney, and saw a familiar glint in her eyes.

"Wait up, Hermione! I'm with you! I totally agree!"

And it was the Boy-Who-Lived's turn to flee the classroom after throwing his stuff into his own bag. Ron looked at them, open mouthed, only to imitate them without a word. Hermione, in her state of anger, had not yet registered that she had two followers now, until they caught up with her around a corner.

"Harry? Ron? What are you doing here?" she asked, looking a lot calmer that she should be.

"In case you don't remember,..." started Ron slowly, "...you just closed the door on Trelawney's nose."

"Oh yeah! That insufferable know-it-all wannabe..."

Her two friends could not help but snicker at her choice of words.

"What?" Asked Hermione, not realising what she had just said.

"Nothing." Harry hid his smile. "And to answer your question, we quit divination too."

"What? No! You can't! Not because of me..." She now had a panic look in her eyes, worried that her rash move caused her two best friends to drop a class.

Harry looked straight at her.

"Last year, you stood by me, with Ron, against the whole school. Now, it's our turn to support you. You were right. She was insulting you. Malfoy does enough of that for everyone."

Hermione seemed a little lost in face of such support. She started to walk again, turning her back to them, trying to wipe her wet eyes discreetly.

"Admit it, Harry." said Ron with a smirk. "You just didn't feel like dying for a fortieth time today."

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Later, the Gryffindor trio sat in the common room, weighing their options. McGonagall couldn't be partial, but her smile when they said they quit a divination class in the middle and were not going back told them otherwise. She simply gave them sheets with description of alternative course.

"I don't fancy Arithmancy much" said Ron, looking at the list. "I'd like to take a simple free study lesson but... Mom would go spare."

"She already has enough on her hand already..." said Hermione, looking at the twins who were wrecking havoc with indoors fireworks.

Harry looked at them a moment, shook his head and looked back at his own list.

"That's it!" declared Ron, loudly. "I'm taking Muggle Studies. At least, I'll understand what dad is always babbling about and even be able to show him some. Take it too, Harry! You're muggle raised! This is going to be so easy, we'll ace this!"

"Always the easy way out, isn't it, Ronald?" said Hermione coldly, without looking up from her book.

"What? For once, I won't be asking you for help!"

"Of course not! You'll be asking Harry's! What's the difference?"

"Well... for once we won't make things up to fill our homework!" replied Ron, sure of his argument.

Harry was getting tired of this.

"Anyway, we're not all-brain like you! We're not trying to shine to the teachers!"

Ron realised what he just said a bit too late. Harry's eyes narrowed. He didn't like that assumption at all. Hermione's mouth was slowly opening and her eyes were squinting. Was she going to cry? To yell? Both? They'd never know. Harry's calm but frosting tone beat her to it.

"Hum. Ancients Runes. Could be fun."

Both his friends turned to him in astonishment.

"Mate... Are you all right?" asked Ron dumbly.

"What is it Ronald? Don't think I can do it?" Harry hissed, narrowing his eyes at the readhead

Ron was anything but stupid.

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Okay, he was. But not that time.

"No! I mean, yes! I mean...I've got nothing against Runes, mate! I'm not doubting you or anything! I'm just... I just though..."

"Ron, shut up for once." said Hermione sharply. Then the news got up to her brain. "Runes... Are you serious, Harry?"

"Yeah. Sure. Why not?" he said, unsure at first, then more convinced.

Hermione squealed, excited, hugging him hard.

Harry was looking at Ron, surprised, over his over-exited only female friend's shoulder.

Hermione quickly let go, only to grab his own shoulder and keep him at arm length.

"We've got to go to Professor Babbling right now! You missed the introductory course last year so we have to find a way to make it up so you can join in with the other third years. Of course I'll help you all I can."

Then, Hermione tugged him to get up, took his hand and dragged him toward the exit of the common room. Harry looked back at Ron pitifully, who looked back smugly, waving his hand in their direction.

'Me and my big mouth.' Thought Harry.

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A list of books in hand, Harry got out of Professor Babbling's office with an excited Hermione chatting next to him. He was glad that Runes wasn't Ron's thing since the books seemed to be horribly expensive. Not that it was a problem to him. Even then, Hermione and he agreed it would be better to look for used books. No sense in upsetting Ron about his family's financial state by parading around with a bunch of new things.

The Runes teacher was delighted to have him in his class. He said that amongst the ones taking the course, very few actually manage good result and more than one dropped it when they saw they had no aptitude. If Harry showed any talent, the professor would gladly help him to get to level with the other students, even if it took over one year. Harry could use his now free period of Divination to catch up. Then, he would join the introductory course of Runes with the second year students. If all went really well, and he doubled the number of hours the second years students put in this in his free time he, maybe, could join Hermione's class by the end of the year.

Harry was a little reluctant to join a class full of those a year younger than him, but agreed none the less. The professor even lent him the course books while he purchased his own. That evening, Hermione convinced him it would be a good thing to start an introduction to the course. Ron grunted and put back the chess board in its wooden box knowing they would not get to play that particular evening. Harry saw that but didn't feel like saying anything that would start another row

between those two. Harry, who saw Hermione starting to spread books all around them, took a serious tone.

"Okay, Hermione. We'll begin this now. But it's the first and last evening I'll actually take a 'Rune Class' like that. Don't make it a habit."

She looked at him, outraged that somebody would refuse taking some of his free time to get ahead in a class, but she saw the small smile of Ron behind Harry. He was trying hard not to look at her. She nodded, not arguing for once, and sat down with Harry at her side.

"Agreed. Let's begin an overview of the course itself. The OWLs goals are to know every rune we work with and their effects. You also have to know their effect when placed beside another. It's like learning a new alphabet and knowing how to make a three letter word. It's very simple in fact."

Ron, from where he sat, reading "The Rise and Fall of the Chudley Cannons" added his two cents.

"So it's like learning a new language. I'm sorry, but that's kinda hard. On top of that, you have to learn the new alphabet from scratch, not knowing the word that can be formed with it. Maybe it's easy for you, Hermione, but..."

"Oh, hush, you! If you want to discuss it, take the course and come back to me for a study session!"

Ron stuck his nose back in his book grumpily.

"He's got a point, Hermione." Said Harry. "It's a whole new language, the result of which is not to carry ideas or messages, but effects and actions."

Hermione looked down, outnumbered.

"But..." continued Harry, looking back at his books, "It's not something impossible if you study it."

She let a small smile escape her lips. Ron let a huge sigh out and closed his book. He fished in his school bag a new roll of parchment, a quill and a bottle of ink. Hermione looked at him, curious.

"What? If you're going to be talking about work all evening, I'm as well to start my own Muggle Studies assignment."

Hermione looked at him, unbelieving. Ron doing homework? Without being prompted to do it? She turned back to Harry with wide eyes.

"Let's get back to Runes, shall we?" said Harry, amused.

"Yeah. Let's" she answered, still shaken. "Well, then. The NEWTs goals are..."

"Still a few years away." Harry interrupted. "Let's concentrate on the here and now, OWLs at most."

Surprisingly, they managed to get something done that evening. Even with Hermione always trying to jump a little too far ahead. They covered two Runes extensively. Harry found a trick to classify the particularities of the runes by comparing them to old Viking and Greek gods he read about in a book once. Not that he remember much about them, but more of their concept. Each of them had a speciality, a territory. Each of them had a personality that fit their specialisation. Ron was so much engrossed in his own work he didn't hear any of that. Hermione, on her hand, was gob smacked. She never thought of that this way. Runes were runes! They did what they did! They were not alive! But she figured that if Harry found it easier to remember them like that, why not?

Something happened that evening. But it would be a few weeks before Hermione realised it.

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Time passed, as it usually does, with its ups and downs. Harry practised Quidditch, but could not go to Hogsmeade as he still lacked the Dursley's written authorisation. Of course, the fact that he practically changed his aunt into an inflated carnival attraction might

explain it. He guessed he could try to pass the dementors with his cloak but the Weasley twins thought otherwise. They gave him a special map that was invaluable. Harry mused, once again, how lucky he was to be friend with the Weasleys. Following his friend, he had quite some fun playing the invisible ghost, scarring Draco and his stooges. Still, he was getting tired of Draco always bugging them unprovoked.

Unfortunately, his little escapade to Hogsmeade wasn't all fun and games. Eavesdropping on a private conversation his teachers were having, he found out about Sirius Black, the escaped convict that Ron's father warned him about at the start of the year. He realised, remembering the taunting Draco threw his way on the Hogwarts Express this year, that the story was well known in the Wizarding world, but had been kept from him on purpose. For his own good, of course. He decided right there and then that he would avenge his parents, if he had the chance. He could not go against his promise not to chase after Black. Harry respected Arthur Weasley and didn't want to betray the man, but, in a moment of clarity, he realised he would not have to. Black was looking for him. If he was good enough to escape a prison full of dementors, a few of them would not keep him from Harry. When he'd show up, he would be ready.

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"Did you get it? I know Ersatz is quite a complex rune, but..."

"It's okay, Hermione." Said Harry over his textbook. "It's crystal clear in fact. I guess that's all of 'em."

"Yes. Now, we'll begin the review." She said confidently.

"What for?" Harry asked, confused.

Hermione looked at the ceiling, as if praying the gods to help her. Anyone knowing her would think she's exasperated. To Harry and Ron, it's just a habit she took when studying with them.

"Honestly, Harry. Do you remember all the runes by now? The memory of the first one probably faded by now."



"No it hasn't." Objected Harry calmly.

"Oh really? Then why don't you tell me which runes we covered in the two first weeks?" she asked, crossing her arms.

And he did. In detail. Spilling all their signification's, known origin and possible uses. After the first one, Hermione looked around to make sure there was not a book open around them, giving him all the answers. After the third, she stopped searching, seeing his eyes seemed to look at her, through her in fact. It's as if he saw the runes right before his eyes. After the tenth one, he stopped. Hermione was speechless, for two whole minutes. Ron was the first to break the silence between them three in the common room.

"Whoa... Harry. That's wicked..."

"Indeed." Said Hermione. "I never heard of anyone learning the first set of runes so fast!"

"Not that!" Said Ron, enthusiast. "He managed to shut you up for two whole minutes!"

Harry burst in laughter as Hermione threw a dirty look to Ron. This later was suddenly looking away, paying great attention at the description of the muggle monetary system in his book.

"You're sure you don't want to revise, Harry?" asked Hermione, uncertain.

"If you insist. It should not take that long." Said Harry, shrugging.

One hour later, they got through the thick textbook describing the runes alphabet. Hermione looked even more flabbergasted.

"Wow. That was intense Harry. You're more than ready to face the second year class. You're even ahead of them! I'll tell Professor Babbling so you can join the class next week."

Hermione began gathering her own first year books of Runes and stuffed them away. Harry stretched and went to Ron.

"So? Have the muggle accepted you in their secret society yet?" asked Harry, sitting on a nearby chair.

"They have a secret society?" Asked Ron, unbelieving.

Harry started laughing and Ron frowned. Having no intention to irk him, Harry started talking about something he was sure his friend would like.

"Sorry there. In fact, they have more than one. They are known to exist, or at least they existed in the past, but the identities of the members, their goals and way of getting to them are mostly a secret. Let me tell you of the little I know about it. Let say... the Stone Cutters."

At the end of that free study session, Ron believed that muggles, unmagical as they may be, could do some pretty cool stuff. In the next days, he tried to find books about secret muggle organisations but, for once, at the greatest shock of the resident bookworm, it was one of Hogwarts' library weaknesses.

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A few days later, Harry began the second year's books. He had so much fun looking at how some runes affected others! But even then, what he saw in the books was so...stiff. He'd have to check books from different authors to check out if they were all like that. Harry figured that if his progress in runes could keep on going like that, it could be a cool sideline in a job later. A professional Quidditch player, of course. While talking with Professor McGonagall about his new schedule, he asked how much could earn as a Rune Writer or Designer and what kind of work goes with that particular branch of magic. He was surprised by her answer. The rarity of Rune Crafters meant that even the less talented earned as much as an experience Auror, the wages just got better for talented Crafters. A truly gifted one could earn more then a Quidditch star without the risks of injuries. Harry never was so happy to have left Divination.

He was currently in the empty common room, enjoying the quiet of his free Divination class. Ron was at his Muggle study class on his new schedule and Hermione... Well he wondered where she was in fact since she wasn't in Divination. She had a weird schedule that showed two classes at the same hour! Something else was bothering him though. He wasn't really alone. Not all that quiet either. The Weasley twins were there, talking, or more like whispering around some gadget that was making some weird lights and smoke now and then. It didn't seem to work as it was planned to by the look on their faces.

What was really bothering him was that he knew they didn't have a free period. They were skipping classes. Again. To make some kind of firework. Or at least he hoped it was. That got Harry angry. Okay. He was a far cry from being a model student. His potions were passable at best, and he slept in History of Magic. But he was there. He attended the class. And here he was working in a free period on a course he took, more or less, willingly to replace one that was utter crap. While those two were playing. He liked the twins and thought they were really cool and all, but he could not stop himself from adding his two cents.

"You two must really hate your mom." He said loudly, his head still bent over his book.

"What was that?" asked Fred, frowning.

"Your mother." Repeated Harry. "Either you don't like her or you don't care."

"You searching for a beating, Potter, or a life long prank?" asked George, growling.

"Neither." Answered Harry who could barely suppress a shiver at the thought. Having to choose, he would take the beating. Less lasting damage. "It's just that it's the only thing that comes to my mind right now, watching you two. Because I know that we have OWLs in our fifth year, and I know you're in your fifth and yet here you are, devising a prank on what, I'm pretty sure, is not a free period. At the

risk of sounding like Hermione, aren't OWLs supposed to shape the kind of courses we can take in our last two years? Ones that eventually decide what jobs we can get?"

"And where does our mom enter this equation, oh sage one?" Asked Fred, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I don't know. Maybe because she IS your mother? That she cares about you? That she worries about you two? All she sees is poor school results and a path toward failure."

"Where is it written exactly that what we are doing is purely for fun? That we won't make a living out of it?" asked George seriously, thinking to have nailed him down.

Harry looked at them silently before replying in a low voice.

"Then it's even worse."

"Damn you, Harry! Could you, at least, have a little faith in us? We though you were a friend! You sound just like our mother, who thinks we can't do anything at all! But our business will work!"

"I don't know if it'll work or not. I'm saying it's even worse... for your mother. Put yourself in her shoes for two seconds. Your sons have poor results at school, and you're at the point of yelling at them to push them to do better. Somehow, your sons fail. How will you forgive yourself? I know she won't. She'll keep on wondering what she did wrong all of her life."

"But..." started George.

"Yes." cut him Harry. "Let's take the probable possibility that you succeed. A huge success. Your business flourish and you earn more money in a month than your father in a year. She'll regret never having faith in you two. To have doubted you. Not only will she never helped you achieving your goal but she stunted your efforts, punishing you for what made you prosper. She's going to feel like she was a really bad mother."

Fred and George looked down at what they were working on. It didn't seem so funny now.

"And if you want to know when I became such a smart arse, I'll just say it's when I took Runes to replace Divination, figuring she'll be proud of me. She's going to be glad that I'll have one more string to my bow."

Harry turned his back to them, resuming his reading before realising he could not concentrate anymore. He threw his book in his bag and exit the common room, slowly making his way for the last period of the day.

The twins laid back on their couch. They looked at each other, synchronised as always.

"You know, I think the shape of this firework is a transfiguration problem. We should ask Professor McGonagall for some catch-up work."

"I quite agree, brother mine. I think it would not be that bad to review charms a little too, for the colours, of course."

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As the twin left her office, Minerva McGonagall let out a small smile. What had those two come around like that? Apologising for the period they missed, and asking for catching up lessons at that! Still, they missed a class. It was not their first time either. She gave them detention for two hours, every Monday until she deemed it enough. They looked quite disappointed, but didn't argue. If only they knew... She would take back their education back to the first year and make them understand and master it all up to their fifth year. 'That'll teach them. Literally.' Minerva thought with a small tugging at the corner of her lips.

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The next week, Harry was back in a classroom during his divination period. But he could call it 'Runes' now. He was looked at oddly at

first, since getting a new student in the school year, even after only two month or so, was quite rare. One that wasn't even in your year was even more! Professor Babbling explained to everyone about Harry changing his elective and that, because of his schedule, he was attending the Ravenclaw/Hufflepuff class instead of the usual Gryffindor/Slytherin one. Harry didn't know any of them very well but waved at the end of the professor's explanations. The open stares were quite unnerving but he learned to put up with them by now. Then class began. They worked at the Az rune. Harry followed with rapt attention. He caught a few titbits of insight that were new, but nothing concept-shattering. Then they practised writing them on a sheet of parchment. The teacher reminded them to work precisely since they would get blocks of woods to write on in two weeks. Probably it was more difficult, Harry mused.

Harry took rolls of parchments and wrote a few 'Az' runes on it, doing it like he always did when taking notes. Seeing this, the teacher went at his side and looked at his work.

"No, no no! Harry! You're not using the Quadrant Case to write them! I want you to write them as you would use them. For a rune to work, it must obey some rules of proportions and size."

"I'm sorry professor. I don't know that method." Harry answered, surprised.

He heard a few students snickers.

"It's nothing to worry about, Harry. Haven't you read 'The Quadrant Bond, first edition?' I lent you?"

Harry smiled nervously, opened his school bag and pulled out all the books the teacher gave him the first time they met. The Rune teacher looked surprised and a little put off.

"I didn't give it to you? It's my mistake then. I'll just show you the basic of the method on theses runes you wrote and I'll lend you a book so you can catch up the rest of this period. However, you'll have to learn it on your own time..."

"It's not a problem, Professor. In fact, I can return these books to you. Mine should arrive by owl tomorrow."

"Excellent!" The teacher took a chair and a quill and began directing Harry where to make lines around the first runes he drew.

"Now see, these lines I just made you draw are the tangent of the curves of the rune. They must join like this. Hum. At first look it's not half bad. Then, by extending them a little, make them cross...yes. And then take the crosses as references for new lines... yes, like that. Then it must be tangent of the inside curves. Now take your compass and draw circles of the diameters of the first line, it should encompass the rune on its border. Yes! Like that! Just... like that..."

Now the professor looked puzzled, and astonished. Harry looked at the gathering of lines and circles and saw the geometry, the perfect symmetry the technique provided. Seeing his rune fit perfectly at the middle of it all was the icing on the cake. It gave him a feeling of perfection and accomplishment.

"Thanks you, professor! This way of checking if your rune is well drawn is fantastic!" Harry thanked him.

When Harry looked up from his sheet, he was surrounded by the whole class. The rune teacher looked up too and smiled.

"Well, that certainly draws attention. The Quadrant Case isn't a way to check out a rune, Harry. It's the only known manner to write them."

The professor took the parchment, examining the perfectly straight lines his new student made without the use of a ruler. Not pointing it out, he took out his own ruler and began drawing lines around Harry's second rune. His cheeks got a little redder as his lines were as straight as Harry's but lack a certain... elegance, if it was possible. He drew a quadrant case over each of the runes Harry already made. They all fitted in. Some seemed a little different from others, but were still a perfect fit. They all had their own balance.

"Well, then. Hum... You could..."

"The Book?" proposed Harry, wanting nothing more than to get out of this embarrassing situation.

"Yes. I'll get it for you. Now class! Back to work! Practice theses runes until you can draw them asleep!" the teacher enthusiastically said.

Students got back at their places, some mumbling something about it being unfair while others were simply amazed. Harry turned his head back on his scroll only to feel long hair brush against his cheek. He jumped back a little in his seat, getting some distance with the girl hunched over his work. The blond girl was looking at it intently. She finally turned dreamy eyes toward him, an enigmatic smile playing on her lips.

"You have a gift, Harry Potter," she said in a soft, lost voice.

"Er. Thanks.... umm"

"Luna Lovegood. Second year Ravenclaw. Don't be shy to ask for help at anytime but..." Then she turned at the perfect set of 'Az'.

"It might be the other way around..." she finally said.

"Hum. Sure! Anytime!" said Harry, glad to have a second opinion on his work, no matter how... special she seemed.

The girl looked at him, a little bit surprised. She gave him a radiant smile before going back at her place, playing with her butterbeer bottle caps necklace. Harry noticed then her wand was stuck behind one of her ear. Ears decorated with radish earrings.

"Don't talk too much to her." Whispered a boy to his left. "You'll catch Looney's weirdness."

A couple of other Ravenclaw around snickered. Harry was more than a little angry. He knew what it was to be called weird. He suffered of it quite a lot when people found out he was a parseltongue the year prior. He looked at the boy, doing his best faking a surprised look.



"Weirdness?" He said a little too loudly for the young boy's taste. "You don't recognize this, do you? It's true that you're still a little young..."

"What do you mean?" asked the boy angrily, on the same level.

"It's not weirdness!" explained Harry slowly, smiling to himself. "It's style! She's got her own! Forget it. You're too young to understand."

The discussion was cut short as the teacher came to give Harry his book about Quadrant Cases. All students got back to their work, not wanting to be caught chatting in class. Professor Babbling was nice, but intolerant of idle hands and minds. He gave a look full of mirth to Harry, handing him the book.

"By the way, Harry. Congratulation. You managed what few, if none before you, had done."

Harry didn't know if he was talking about the runes or the standing up for Luna. Maybe both. Anyway, he was curious about the subtlety of this Quadrant Case and absorbed himself in it.

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Things got back on track from then on. Hermione, looking as tired as ever, was ashamed for forgetting the Quadrant Case. When she learned he hadn't needed it, but that he found it was good background knowledge to have, she was silent for a whole three minutes. Ron looked up from his book about non-magical castles in England, then back to it.

"Humpf. Never thought I would see Hermione silent twice in a lifetime. Runes aren't the only gift you have, I guess."

That sent both boys in a fit of laughter and Hermione stomped her right foot once, trying to look angry. And failing.

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A few weeks later, Harry was roaming the library on a free evening. He left the second year class with a little regret a few days ago. He was getting to know Luna a little better and liked how the younger blond witch thought. She had the craziest ideas of how to use runes! He just joined the third year class and the teacher saw his progress slow to a normal speed. He was a little suspicious but didn't comment. He was right to be. Harry saw in Hermione's eyes, for the first time ever, the green demon of jealousy that he already spotted in Ron's a few times by now. She was jealous of his innate understanding of runes. So he downplayed his progresses and seemed to study the same thing over and over again to understand them.

In fact, he just finished the third year program in runes. He didn't have to really learn the effects of a combination of two runes. He could guess it just by thinking about them, one at the side of the other. Writing on wood was fun but he was impatient to get to carve them. Unfortunately, that would not be before the fourth year. So, he decided not to stunt his progress, but to broaden his learning. He had a nice pile of gold. It was time to put it to use. He would buy the right books. It took him a whole hour, but he noted the titles of all the rune books which, at first glance, didn't seem to be written by a 'stiff, learned-by-heart' Rune Master. Then, he took his invisibility cape and did the same in the restricted section. His collection would make Hermione so jealous! He made sure to ask for evening owls so she didn't notice them coming at breakfast.

The morning after began as all the others did. Harry was deep in concentration in the only book he borrowed at the library the day before, Hermione was in an Arithmancy one and Ron was stuffing his face. But every good morning have to come to an end. Not with a potion master this time, but still a greasy git.

"Acting smart, Potter?" drawled Malfoy. "Trying to impress the little Mudblood at your side, maybe?"

Harry was pulled of his deep trance he got when working on rune on the breach of good progress. He was pissed. But Malfoy wasn't done yet. Oh no.

"Maybe you want to carve yourself a nice little hole to hide yourself from Sirius Black? Or the dementors! Maybe they'll try to get you in the Quidditch changing room to give you a nice little kiss! It would be great if they could take care of you bushy friend at the same time..."

"Malfoy." began Harry in barely contained anger. "Leave before I deal some lasting damage here."

Malfoy was about to say something but saw that Harry had an arm straight, probably pointing him from under the table. His wand arm.

"You wouldn't dare. Even to defend your mud..."

Harry had enough. Despite his threat, he knew cursing Malfoy in the middle of the Great Hall with a majority of the students watching wasn't a good idea. However, he didn't care. And something really weird Luna said to him once gave him a sick idea.

"Ridiculous!"

The spell hit Draco on the leg and the result was... unexpected. His robe all but disappeared, leaving him in a tight, revealing leather suit. Or, at least, what Harry could imagine what a revealing leather suit would be like. He now sported a black shiny leather harness with ass-free tight shorts, spikes all over and a whip at his side. The best part was the leather mask with a zipper that kept his mouth shut. If Draco had been a boggart, he would have been instantly dissipated from the laughter that erupted in the Great Hall.

"Sorry, Malfoy. I don't swing that way. Please, refrain your urges." Said Harry, smiling while Ron was spilling food everywhere so hard he was laughing. Hermione draw her book close to her eyes, covering her face.

Draco wanted desperately to say something but choose to run away instead. Harry got up from his chair and whispered to the twins, who were howling and whistling at Malfoy retreating form.

"We need to talk. Before dinner, outside the gates." Said Harry simply.

The twin looked at him oddly. His eyes were serious. Someone would be in pain. They didn't want to be at the place of that poor bloke.

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"What is it you want?" asked Fred, as he and his other self got to Harry. He was sitting against a low stone wall leading to the entrance doors of Hogwarts.

"I need... pranks." He said.

"Pranks?" asked the twins in stereo.

"Yes. I want you to prank Malfoy. Not once or twice. Every day. Multiples times per days if possible. I'll help. I'll purchase whatever stuff you need within reasonable limits. I'm willing to fund research for trying new stuff on him. I want to give him hell."

The twins looked at themselves before asking, "Why now..." began Fred

"All of a sudden?" finished George.

Harry had a determined look on his face.

"He called Hermione a Mudblood. Again. He's done that for the last three years. He keeps saying he wants both of us dead and he keeps saying it loud enough for everyone to hear but no-one does anything about it. All I ever really did was to tell him to back off. And now he wants to interrupt my study time? How much of my time will I let him waste? I'm finally sick of it. He started a war back in first year and I'm sick of fighting it battle by battle. I've only just realised how big a blow I took. It's time for some retaliation."

The twin grinned and went to each sides of Harry, each putting an arm around his shoulder.

"Harry, mate, you're..." began George.

"...finally..." pursued Fred.

"...growing a pair. It's going..."

"...to be a pleasure, even had it..."

"...been for free. But with your..."

"...funding, it's going to be grand."

An alliance formed, the twins went back to work, harder than ever. They said later that, that week, you could sometime mistake the fumes coming from the fifth year dormitories for ghost so thick it was.

Two weeks before Christmas Break hell was released at the Malfoy Heir.

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I hope it's enough for a starting chapt. At least, update won't be delayed! Unless I don't get review. Told'cha. I'm that evil.

## Author's notes

As the first reviews flooded me, I realized a few errors as it often happens with new words. First off, about the "elective". Students can't choose courses before the third year. So there shouldn't be a second year in Ancient Rune that Harry could join. Since I planned him to meet Luna at that moment, let's just say that in this alternate universe, Rune is an elective from second year due to the difficult and long learning process of Runes.

Next: Professor Septima Vector is a woman who teaches Arithmancy. Half-mistake that have been corrected. At the time, only professor Vector appeared in my head when thinking of Runes. I'll have to correct that small mistake for the whole fanfiction. Mr. Babbling is going to be the Ancient Rune teacher. On the official site of J.K. Rowling, she doesn't specify if it's a man or a woman. So I'll keep it as a man.

Let's keep this as error free as possible for a best better good reading! ;)

## Disclaimer

Stopping the car next to the microphone "It's going to be a Big Mac, fries and a Harry Potter to go please." "Sorry, we're out of Harry Potter. We can change it for an Action Man for the same price." The car's tire spun and drove the hell away.

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The twins got to Harry at the breakfast table, wearing a huge smile.

"So, it begins today?" deduced Harry.

"Today." They answered in unison.

"We'll have to..."

"...find a way to..."

"...slip some stuff in his things." They finally said together.

"I've been working on some stuff myself." whispered Harry. "These past weeks, I've put some of that rune studying into practice. It works. It works damn well. Don't worry about those other pranks. I've got an idea. They're going to be ready during Christmas break. Just in time to infiltrate the Slytherin common room."

They looked at him, an awed look on their faces.

"Infiltrate?" they whispered.

"Wouldn't be the first time..." confirmed Harry, grinning.

Harry remembered the day he asked the twins for pranks. He approached Hermione and Ron too.

"I think it's time we took another trip into the in the Slytherin common room." He said softly to them while Flitwick explained the mechanism of some charm that he didn't pay much attention to.

"What?" whispered Hermione sharply.

"It is time. We have to get back at Draco, once and for all. To stop this sick circle. I'm tired of the insults, the traps and the sneers. I'm going to recruit Ron's brothers for an all-out war on him. Some strikes will come straight from his own dormitory. We'll need polyjuice. A good batch. We'll keep some in reserve."

"We can't do that! It's not... really that big of a deal, what happened this morning, Harry." Pleaded Hermione. "It's nice of you, in an all vengeful way, but really, those names don't affect me anymore."

"Shame on you, then, Hermione." Said Harry, serious. His friend didn't expect that. She looked at him, not understanding and kind of hurt.

"He's calling you a Mudblood." He slowly said, their group managing to escape Flitwick's vigilance. "A Mudblood. Meaning your blood is full of mud. You can live with that? Okay. But what about your parents?"

"My parents?" she squealed.

"Yes. 'Blood' also mean your direct lineage. Your parents. Your sisters and brothers. Your grandparents, uncle and aunts. He's calling them a puddle of mud. And that your blood comes from that mud. How would your parents like to be the cause of prejudice toward you? What if they learned of it? Will they feel ashamed for not being magical? How would they look upon you, brave Gryffindor, who won't even fight?"

Hermione's head was low and she looked really pained. She was shaking with rage. Having all the basic meaning of those insults she bore for far too long hit her heavier than the first time she had them directed her way.

"That worm is going to pay," she whispered harshly. "I can't believe I blinded myself so much for the sake of not causing trouble. You're right. This is a matter of Gryffindor pride. Family pride. It is not an empty or sinful concept. It is based on the love of our family. I'll do it. But I'm not too enthusiastic about stealing from professor Snape again..."

"No need," Harry reassured her. "I'm making a huge purchase at the apothecary in Diagon Alley where we buy our school stuff. It's going to have so many ingredients he won't even suspect polyjuice."

"Nothing... nothing harmful in this... war... Harry?" asked Hermione, her old self resuming control of her brain.

"Nothing... permanent." Replied Harry, non-committally. "Ron, when the time comes, I'll need you to get in the Slytherin Common room. Meanwhile, I'll be quite busy myself. You'll have to take my cloak and spy at their entrance whenever you can. Learn the passwords, their schedule and the times of greatest traffic. If you can, find out the entrance of the third year dorms. It's going to be vital if we want to seem like we belong there long enough to put all the stuff in."



Ron nodded once. He was glad there was something he could do to help. It was important too, no matter how he looked at it. He'd do his best.

Harry got back to the present, the twins at his sides at the breakfast table. He was impatient to see Draco appear for breakfast for once.

"A clue on what's going to happen?" asked Harry with a low voice, kicking Hermione's feet for attention. Ron was already all ears. He even slowed his eating to sipping a glass of orange juice.

Fred looked up and, much to Harry's surprise, whistled an old muggle song. What was the title again? Love something...

Draco finally entered the room. Fred whistled a bit stronger. Draco's hair turned pink. 'That's it! Love is in the air! In the hair! Pink! That makes sense.' Thought Harry.

Their little group snickered as Draco passed, unaware of his new look. Or how his now quite long hair took a heart shaped form. Everybody looked at him with saucer eyes at the Slytherin table.

"What? Do I have something on my robes?" asked Draco, looking at himself. Along with the pink hair, it sounded so feminine that the Golden trio and the Devil duo couldn't stop their howls of laughter. It took a moment, but Draco finally found a reflective surface, and then he understood.

"POTTER!"

Harry looked at him, laughing all the while, hand up in a posture that said 'I didn't do it, but wished I had.'

Draco left and wasn't seen for the rest of the breakfast.

"Vengeance and peace for breakfast. Fred, George, you just made my day," said Harry.

"Anytime, mate. And as it is right now..." started Fred.

"... it could happen at any time!" ended George.

Harry's mood went soaring. The next weeks were fun. Harry experimented with runes on everyday objects now. His level of achievement would have been barely within the sixth years' grasp, but was simple fun for him. Hermione had long given up on her jealous streak. He didn't hide much from her anymore: he was just too good. He showed her his new collection of books and she managed to get a promise to let her borrow each of them sometime. His collection grew almost every day. She even asked him for help. Sometimes, she didn't understand Harry's answer to her question completely, but still always found something to get her to move forward. Anything that got her smarter was a good thing after all.

Ron was often gone and got back to the common room right before curfew. He always carried a small notebook and pen with him. Harry felt the Slytherin common room would hold no secret from them by the time they went in.

Hermione used Myrtle's toilets to brew the potion once again, much to the ghost's pleasure. Harry went to see her now and then to supply her with ingredients or simply for company. Ron came too, once in a while, stiff from sitting on the dungeon's cold stone floor.

Meanwhile, Draco got pranked. And how he got pranked! It was at least twice a day now! The pink hair incident happened again. Probably some advertisement for Valentine's Day a few months early. So did the appearance of the leather suit Harry jinxed him with when it all started. Sometimes, both at the same time. He got into the unhealthy habit of tripping when walking on the grass. Every ten steps. That snow covered said grass didn't seem to change anything.

Christmas break finally came, earning Draco some peace. It was still a week before the potion was ready, and Ron had to check out the changes in the Slytherin's comings and goings from their common room. They both decided to stay one more week, then travel to Hogsmeade to have Ron's older brother Bill apparate them to their respective homes. Harry spent a lot of time building an arsenal for his war against Draco. Back from Christmas, he would be as pompous

as ever. His downfall would be that much harder, and satisfying to watch.

After Ron and Hermione's departure, Harry figured the rest of the break would be quite uneventful without Draco around to entertain him. Or so he thought. His Ancient Runes skill developed frighteningly fast now that he had all day to work on them. He revised many charms and transfiguration work too since they combined well with runes. These skills were way harder to work out, but he remembered his vow to be ready when Black would come for him. Christmas was a golden opportunity for the murderer.

Searching for offensive uses of runes and defensive spells made him remember that he had appointments with Professor Lupin to learn the Patronus Charm. He could use the opportunity to ask for some tips to practice commonly used offensive spells like the disarming jinx, the shield spell and the stunning curse. Progress in all these fields was slow, but steady. He was particularly good at disarming. Maybe a little too good, he thought, as he targeted a suit of armour once and ripped it off of its sword, almost beheading himself as it flew his way. He remembered that the spell was originally designed to catch the opponent's wand. He now knew to be careful if the weapon was of the sharp kind.

Progress with his Patronus was less steady. He tried different powerful happy memories to fuel the spell, from the time he first flew a broom to that one where he realised that Ginny would be okay in the Chamber of Secrets. Unfortunately, he was too dazed back then to remember it properly. It came as no surprise that the memory getting him the strongest reaction was from one in which he was looking at his parents in his photo album. He let the feeling grow by watching it often and concentrating on his feelings. The work was taking time off his rune study, but the progress was rewarding.

Then came the night that changed what he thought he knew about Sirius Black.

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He was back from a midnight snack in the kitchen. He could not believe that Dobby found a job there! It was good to see him doing something he was actually happy to do. Harry was nibbling a cookie, watching the map to avoid the teacher's patrols. What appeared on the map instead made him swallow a bite wrong. Peter Pettigrew. The one who fought Sirius Black when he found out he betrayed Lily and James. Harry knew the map never been wrong before and could even point him out from under his cape, as the twin proved him. Even if someone knew he was there, he would have had to curse the map itself to change anything on it. He kept it on him at all that evening. Could polyjuice work on it? He would have to test that out after the holidays.

Harry briskly walked up to the position of the dot with the flag of a dead man's name on it. He rounded another corner. The dot was almost on him! Where was he? He must be invisible too. Harry's panic backed down a little as he held his breath for any sounds indicating where the invisible man could be. A very small noise he couldn't hear before met his ears. A small... clicking noise. Like a cat's footsteps on a hard floor with his claws out. Only smaller. He looked down. And saw Ron's rat. He looked at the map. The dot followed the rat's moves perfectly. That rat was Peter Pettigrew. It was a fact now. He could not deny it. He remembered Ron loosing the rat the day before he went home. He let his food box open on his bed for him.

Harry silently turned back to his common room, his mind blank. He whispered the password, the sleeping fat lady letting him pass even if she didn't see him. She was more asleep than awake after all. Harry sat on his bed, hearing the rain fall outside on this particularly warm winter night.

His brain began to work slowly and his newly developing rune analytic mind took over, displaying facts in front of his eyes, making a rune word out of this situation. He was searching for a balance, for the truth. Peter Pettigrew was alive. Sirius Black never killed him. If he didn't, why didn't Peter kill Sirius if he was that hell bent on getting revenge for his friends? If this was the case, Sirius didn't escape from Azkaban to kill him, but to kill Peter. Why now when he had him back then? How did he find out he was here, in Hogwarts? The

newspapers. He saw the picture of the Weasleys in Egypt. Scabber was on it. That made sense. One thing didn't. Sirius Black went to Azkaban, the greatest prison of the Wizarding world. Peter is supposed to have fought him, at least up to a stand still since he was alive, until Aurors came and captured Black. Why didn't Peter show up after that? He was a hero! He could have taken the place of his godfather! But he didn't. He left a finger behind, faking his death. He had something to hide. Something so awful that it might have granted him the fate of his godfather.

Harry got up of his bed and dressed up warmly. The rain had practically stopped. He grabbed his map and explored the castle from the towers to the dungeons. Nothing. After two whole hours, he took a secret passage and went outside, on the grounds. Far enough from the castle, he began calling. Calling for the supposed murderer of his parents. He went near Hagrid's Hut, looking at every details on his map. He walked to the edge of the Forbidden Forest but found nothing there. Unwary of his tiredness, he went on and something finally answered his call when he neared the Whomping Willow. Calling again and again, preparing his numbs, wets and frozen feet toward the Quidditch pitch, a dark form erupted from under the Willow's roots. Harry looked at the map he still held in hands and saw a passage that lead far away, out of Hogwart's grounds. The form, under the dim light of the end of the night, was the one of a massive black dog. A familiar black dog. He saw him once already. Right after he hexed his aunt, when he accidentally called the Knight Bus. Peter Pettigrew was a rat. Sirius Black would be a dog. He looked back at his map as the dog stopped four meters away from him. The name Sirius Black was clearly written on it, standing in front of Harry Potter.

"Sirius Black? It's you, isn't it?" he said, out of breath from all this running around and calling.

The figure blurred to give place to a scary looking man. Strangely, Harry wasn't scared at all. It was like a living dream. Good or bad, that was yet to be determined.

"Peter Pettigrew... you came for him, right? He's an animagus. A rat. The rat of my friend Ron Weasley."

The man's eyes burned fiercely and took an intensity that, with his bony frame, made him look like a human wraith. He nodded once.

"You're... my godfather, right?" asked Harry.

Sirius's eyes lost their fire at once, gaining an unsuspecting softness. He nodded again. Harry's brain went in overdrive to catch up. The only solution possible as the 'runeword' completed itself in his head. The puzzle was assembled and he could see the bigger picture.

"You were not the secret keeper. Peter was. He betrayed them. He tricked you. You've been in Azkaban for the last twelve years... not saying a thing... because of him."

Many wrinkles disappeared from his godfather's face. Relief washed his traits and he seemed to stand taller, as if a burden was lifted off his shoulders.

"We'll clear your name!" began Harry, words doing their best to escape his mouth all at once. "We'll catch him and make him admit it! You'll have justice on your side! I'll talk to professor Dumbledore. Give me a day or two at most! Be ready! I'll get you out of this! I have... so many questions to ask you..."

Then he shuddered. Hard. The cold wind was picking up and he was wet from head to toe. He turned back toward the castle, mind in turmoil, when a voice, a wrecked sound unused for a very long time, rang in the winter chill.

"Harry... you're... so much like your father James. It's good to meet you at last."

The man disappeared once again, a black dog finding his way under the root at the bark of the tree.

Harry ran. He ran to the castle like he never did. He felt no urge to sleep. Fortunately. He revived the dieing fire in the common room and practically put his hands and feet in it. It took some time, but he warmed up again. He was wrapped in a simple towel near the fire, his damp clothes now in a pile at the base of his bed. He took a long hot

shower. Then, he changed in a fresh set of warm clothes. He felt tired, like he could sleep the week. But at the same time, he was full of purpose and of the energy to accomplish his goals. He got to his bed, fully clothed and thinking of what to do. He stopped dead in his tracks. There he was. Peter. In his rat form, on Ron's bed. Sleeping near his food box. If he tried to catch him now, the rat would bite him and escape. If he realized that Harry knew his secret, he would transform and could try to kill him. He had to trap him. Into something he couldn't transform. Something that he could not break.

Harry didn't know the Unbreakable charm. Hermione surely did, but she was not here. On the other hand, he knew perfectly how to do the equivalent in runes. Harry fished in his trunk and found something adequate. A small wooden box with a locket meant to hold his supply of Belladonna seeds for his potion work. He found an empty box of chocolate frog on the side of Ron's bed and put the seeds in it. He sat on his bed, writing the runes necessary on the wooden box with great care. Once done, he took a little carving tool and finished his work, making it permanent. The runes wouldn't be erased accidentally. Just for the heck of it, he put a runeword on the inside to prevent any kind of transformation. He made sure they were perfect before going to the next step. He put the tip of his wand on each runes and powered them. Never had he seen a wooden box look so cool. He instantly knew that it worked.

He got up and casually walked to Ron's bed. He woke Scabber quite harshly by lifting him by the tail, his heart beating so hard Harry thought it would burst out of his chest. He dropped the rat in the box and closed the lid. The rat tried to put a paw to stop it from closing on him, but Harry pushed harshly, forcing him to retract it inside the box with a yelp. He secured it with the frail looking lock that was now unbreakable from the runes carved on the box. Harry heard him turning in the wooden box and scratching, trying to find a way out. A thought came to Harry. What if Peter Pettigrew didn't show up when he took him to Dumbledore? He would pass as insane. He had to... yes. That would do nicely. He spoke clearly toward the box.

"It's over, Peter. I took Harry's form and now I'm going to kill you. But not here. I don't want the students to find your corpse. I'll take you to

James's and Lily's graves for you to die over it. Isn't it just a fitting end for a traitor?"

The movements in the box stopped totally. Harry knew his words hit their marks. He just hoped the rat didn't die right there from a heart attack.

Harry walked toward the Headmaster's office hoping that, for once, when something really important mattered, he would be there. It was past seven by now. Would he wake him? Would he tell him to come back later? Harry knew it was stupid but he was a nervous wreck. He was about to beg his way to the gargoyle when he suddenly realised the date. Christmas had come and gone, but it was New Year's Day! Harry had to laugh out loud, probably scaring the rat in his box further. He knew where the Headmaster would be! Or soon be! He directed his feet toward the Great Hall, suddenly hungry for a huge breakfast. He was amongst the first present. He hid the box in his pocket, even if it stood out a bit.

Harry forced himself to eat slowly not to over eat and get sick on this day. Time fly by sometimes. At other times, it crawls toward the next minute. Harry experienced both, as he waited for the headmaster to show up while dreaming of what could happen with his godfather around, free. The Headmaster finally showed up, a little after eight. Harry jumped on his feet, causing his chair to crash behind him. He placed it back up nervously and walked, shaking but smiling, toward the white bearded man.

"Harry? Is something wrong?" Dumbledore asked, caringly.

"Could... could we go to your office, sir? I have something very important to tell you. I know it will push your breakfast a little bit... maybe a lot... but it's really important... and... and..."

Albus squeezed Harry's shoulder reassuringly.

"Harry. Calm down. Of course we can. Don't worry about it."

He illustrated his point by taking a toast and some bacon from a plate.



"See? It should be enough to keep this old body up and about for a while. Let's see what so bad that got you in this state."

The trip to the office was quick, and Harry could not stop himself from checking the content of his pocket. Dumbledore was concerned. After last year's episode with the diary, he could not help but to worry about the poor boy. Once they climbed the stairs, passed the gargoyle, and entered the office itself, Albus seated himself behind his desk while Harry took a chair in front of it.

Harry took a breath and began his tale. At first, Albus smiled at Harry's shyness to admit his midnight snack. God knows he needed the food with the kind of summer he must endure! Then came the surprise about the discovery of Peter Pettigrew. Could this strange map be dysfunctional? He never heard of such an item inside Hogwarts. And the trip in the snow! The meeting with Sirius almost sent him to check on the boy but no injuries, not even physical contact with the man, was stated. No wand drawn, only shocking words.

Then, Harry told about creating an indestructible rune box and Albus began, against his own will, to doubt Harry's words. But then Harry got the mentioned object out of his pocket, the object he kept checking all the way up to his office. There was no mistaking the work. Or the soft glow coming from the runes on the box. Just one look at it and Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwart, knew that this box would survive any mortal being alive right now, even if it had to carry the weight of a giant on top of it all that time. It was the kind of work that could hold the most precious treasure of a king for posterity! And to say it had the name of an Apothecary written on it! What publicity!

He got to the more mundane situation ahead compared to Harry's work. The box contained a rat, who was a murderer in his animagus form. Dumbledore took the box slowly. Then he spoke clearly, loudly.

"Hogwart, seal this room."

A light hum was heard and Harry, not thinking to be any smarter than anyone else, still realized that nothing would come in or out of the Headmaster's office without his consent. Albus opened the box. A rat

sped out at near light speed. As if the greatest wizard of all England didn't expect that. He caught it in mid-flight from his desk with a quick spell. The rat turned into a man. A babbling man in thorn, old clothes with prominent front teeth. Was he ugly. He smashed in a wall because of his momentum and fell on his back, dazed.

Albus calmly got up and bound him in ropes and many other spells.

"If you even try to change back, Peter, let me tell you you're going to be in a lot of pain. On top that it won't work, of course."

The face of the traitor did show he tried it and that he didn't like the result at all. His bounds were intact and the pain took a few seconds to subside. He finally slumped down, looking at them with watery eyes.

"You don't understand!" he said in a squeaky voice.

"If you're innocent, you wouldn't have tried to run away from me. Harry. Let's leave him here for a while. We have someone to bring in the warmth of the castle I think."

Harry dumbly nodded and led the way toward the exit. Professor McGonagall was waiting at the entrance of the office, looking worried.

"Albus! What's happening? The gargoyle refused to let me pass, even with the password!"

"It sure didn't, Minerva. I sealed the room. I sealed it back behind me and it will stay that way until I get back. We have a few minutes of walking to do outside. Why don't you grab a coat and come with us? Mr. Potter just told me a tale worth retelling."

And so he did for Harry who was too nervous to even open his mouth. He often asked Harry if he told it right but the young boy simply nodded and mumbled nervously. What if Sirius wasn't there? What if didn't trust him enough to come out with the teachers in tow? They soon reached the violent tree and Harry's fear peaked.

"Mr. Black! I'm back! Professor McGonagall and Headmaster Dumbledore are with me! We captured Pettigrew and saw his ugly face! You can come out!"

Harry didn't have to worry more than two seconds. A black dog ran outside from under the roots of the tree, its tongue hanging from its mouth. He wanted nothing more than to pounce on the boy who freed him to lick his face to no end! He spent the whole night worrying about him. Sending a thirteen years old boy capture a seasoned Death Eater seemed rather foolish to him. But he had been shocked from seeing Harry, who already knew the truth on top of it! He slowed down though, figuring Dumbledore and McGonagall might see this as an attack. Better play it safe. He stopped a few meters from Harry, and changed his form from a shaggy black dog to a shaggy black haired man. He looked at Dumbledore and asked one thing.

"Permission to hug my godson, Headmaster?"

The old man's eyes twinkled happily and his hand left his wand in his sleeve.

"Granted."

Sirius scooped up Harry and twirled him around, laughing like a mad man.

"I knew you'd do it! My boy! My wondrous godson! I'll never thank you enough! It's worth more than one bloody Firebolt! I'll give you the company for next Christmas, dammit!"

Harry was laughing hard and though Hermione would be so glad. She was right! It was Sirius Black who gave him his new Firebolt! Her letter contained many threats not to ride it before the teachers could check it out.

Sirius finally let Harry down and shook Dumbledore's and Minerva's hands. This later took him in a hug, glad to find back one of her lost little Gryffindor. Sirius turned back toward Albus with angry eyes, looking more like the ex-con he was.

"Where is he? Where's the little rat?"

"Bound in my office. Out of your reach. You'll have to endure being Harry's pet for a few days since the Ministry's closed for the holidays. But you're allowed to 'hang around' as much as you like. Rest. Eat. Sleep well. A real trial, a fair one, awaits you. You have to look your best to sway the jury to your side with your manly charms! Let's hope there is a majority of woman and that you didn't lose your touch..." Albus finished with a wink.

Sirius let out a barking laugh and transformed back, bouncing around Harry like a puppy. Harry felt the castle would be even warmer this holiday, now that he had some family to celebrate it with.

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The last of Harry's vacations was really fun. The relaxing kind of fun. He didn't stop studying much, but now he had a friend resting near the fire with him. The few Gryffindors that stayed for the holidays asked about him and Harry simply told that he was a stray dog he found and that he would bring it back home.

Sirius ate a lot, slept a lot and looked so much better after a shower and a shave in the dormitory's bathrooms. Sirius never forgot the rat, but still enjoyed the comfy time he had in his old common room, with his newfound nephew. Even more than exerting a vengeance that would send him back in prison. He could live with that. Especially after Harry told him how he captured Pettigrew, impersonating him when the rat was trapped in a box. He could only laugh at the idea and at the imagination of Harry. To kill Peter over Harry's parents grave! The idea had quite some merit though... Harry told him bits of his life, now and then. His friends. His hated family. At that one, Sirius growled. There would be changes...

He watched Harry practice his Charms and Transfiguration courses, giving him tips of what he remembered could help him at times they were alone. But his rune work was what mesmerized him the most. He didn't study Ancient Runes but he had some memories of a girl who was working on an essay... still in her birthday suit in bed with

him... And he remembered it looked complicated as hell to draw a single rune. Harry drew them as if he was simply taking notes.

Albus finally got back to him with news of the matter of his trial. It would be taken in front of the Wizengamot in an emergency session. He showed him the box, made in a few minutes, maybe an hour, which held Peter in his rat form. It was simply astonishing. Albus asked him not to tell a single thing about his unique work to Harry.

"This boy doesn't know where his ability stops yet. Let him work and discover it all by himself. It would be sad to stunt his growth by telling him that this is the best he can do." Albus sagely told him.

Sirius recognized the Headmaster there. Some would say he did not care. That he doesn't want to recognize Harry's work and natural abilities. Sirius knew that was simply encouraging self-development. The last week of the holidays came to an end and Sirius found a moment to transform and talk to Harry before the students would be back. He was looking glad and sad at the same time.

"Harry. I'll have to go now. I'm going in a house that is safe for me. I don't know in what kind of state it'll be after all these years, but I'll manage to make it safe enough for you. Maybe will I be able to convince Dumbledore to let you live with me in the summer. From what you told me, that would be quite the upgrade from the Dursley's."

Harry smiled, sad to see him go but an incredible hope blooming inside of him.

"That. Would be. Awesome. If you need any help at all to dust the place, I'm all for it! Magical or muggle way, I don't care! I'm used to it!"

Sirius smiled and hugged him warmly.

"My life's getting back on tracks, buddy. All thanks to your quick wits. Keep working on those runes. I've heard it help develop deduction skills. I guess they were right. Write now and then. We've got a life of catching up to do!"

The next day, Hermione and Ron found Harry so sincerely happy they thought he got hooked on the cheering charm during Christmas break. The tale they got as an explanation had them impersonating fishes out of the water. Ron could not even find the wits to point out a gobsmacked Hermione.

"Mate, is that your idea of a vacation?" asked Ron, eyebrows raised.

Harry found that one pretty funny since... well... until now it WAS the quieter vacation he had here! He laughed honestly and his friends were glad to see that the shadow, that small part of sadness that was often around him, was gone. He found a place he belonged. A family of two, was still a family.

"Now," Harry began, grinning maliciously, "...who's up for some Malfoy hunting? He had all of Christmas break to rest. Time for life and pranks to resume."

Both his friends looked eager to start. His good mood was contagious. Hermione even lost her tired bags under her eyes during the holidays! It was time for the Golden Trio and the Devil Twins to strike.

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I found this to be the best place to stop this chapter. Up next: Prank...War...

Author Notes: Thanks for the review all! I hope It doesn't get out too rushed! I'm trying to skip to the main ideas of this work, so that's why some details are left in the dark. If one of the original characters doesn't appear, like Remus Lupin, that simply mean that he won't have an important part in the story. But yes, Lupin DID taught him the Patronus. It's mentioned...

Disclaimer:

"And now our courageous participant have to decide between the two prize: a full-paid trip to Cancun or what's in this...envelope... Remember that our Grand Mystery Prize is no one else than Harry Potter!"

"The envelope! The envelope!!!!"

"Our participant choose the envelope! And inside is... three half-price coupons for a Burger at Wendy's! Congratulation!"

"WHAT???!!! NO!!!"

-----

Harry and Ron easily stalked the two small first year Slytherins that the redhead thought were the best choice. Those two usually went unnoticed. The Gryffindor infiltrators used a full body bind on them and dragged the two poor boys in a broom closet. They did so from behind, never showing themselves. Once in the closet, they cut a few hairs from each and assured them they would come back to free them later. They had nothing against them in particular but it had to be done.

Then, they went to the bathroom-turned-potion-lab and presented the hairs to Hermione who finished the potion wordlessly. She handed them each their vial, fighting hard her conscience. The boys each entered their stall and drank the smelly mixture. Oddly enough it tasted better than Crabbe's and Goyle's. It was disturbing to think that some Slytherin tasted better than the other. They prefer not to think about it anymore. The process in itself was as painful as they remembered. Even more, since their targets were way smaller than

them, forcing them through even more changes. They kept the rest of the cauldron in individual vials for later uses, or if they had to stay transformed for more than an hour. Hermione managed to make their uniforms fit their new size, and changed their house crest on their chest as well as the colour of their ties.

Ron and Harry finally each took a backpack full of surprises and went back down to the dungeons to prepare a greeting from the Holiday's vacations for Draco like he never had before.

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Draco's new year began very badly. In fact, it was the worst he ever had. Ever. Even later, looking back at it, he'd still see it as the worst. It wasn't once or twice a day now. He became a walking hex. People began looking at him from afar, waiting for something to happen. Whatever time of the day it was, they didn't have to wait very long.

Each morning, his hair took a new, random colour. At first, it was all Slytherin colours. Silver. Green. Snakes. Oh yeah. He looked like the medusa more than once and the small first years were running away from him, taking great care not to look at him in the eyes. One day, he thought his hair would finally stay his healthy bleached blond. They turned white. He guessed the spells must have been wearing off so he didn't bother with it much. It wasn't that bad. Anyway, he had Charms and didn't have the time to have them changed back right away.

Unfortunately for him, in the middle of the class, professor Flitwick began to stare at him and asked Draco to come closer. As he passed the rows of seats - since he always sat in the back - the quiet snickering began once again. He wondered what colour it was now and was thankful to the teacher for dealing with it right away. That was not to be the case. The Charm teacher poked at his hair with his wand, getting a reaction and a yawn.

'A yawn?' Draco asked himself.

Conjuring a small mirror for the young man to see, Flitwick resumed probing at the intriguing hair cut. Draco blinked twice at what he saw



in the mirror. A ferret. A white ferret. His hair had formed a white ferret. A moving one. Flitwick spent the rest of the class examining the charm used to accomplish that and what it could do before dispelling it when the bell rang.

There was also a little problem with the fires. Each time he got close to any of them, they would at least double in intensity. How many ruined potions...

He couldn't sleep well either. His bed got colder as the night passed. He began waking up around midnight with his face aching like crazy as if it was spread with itching powder. The first time it happened, he looked in his bedside mirror, expecting a colony of ants getting busy. Instead, he saw the face of a rotting Inferi. He never looked at this mirror again. He got used to midnight showers to get rid of whatever was so itchy.

Then, dungbombs began to explode as he opened his trunk.

His books refused to open for him.

His school bag always seemed full with almost nothing in it.

One day, at dinner, Crabbe and Goyle pointed at his hair and face, grunting something. He sighed, took a pocket mirror he used to carry on himself and saw the worst thing ever. His hair had turned red and he had freckles. From the Gryffindor table came one of those hated voices.

"My lost brother! Where have you been?" yelled Fred.

He so hated those twins. He went to them and demanded to stop all of this but they told him that they were not the instigators of the pranks but only the executioners of that particular one. And the ferret hairs. They didn't feel like admitting they were the creator of the 'midnight itching powder'. Anyway, they were not the one to put it on his pillow... Draco went to Harry and threatened him to have his freshly released godfather killed if he kept it up.

The week following this threat was pure torture.

All the hair products of the Slytherin dorms found their way in his trunk. Seeing how much hair problems he had recently, and how he acted as if he owned the world, he was quickly pointed as being the culprit. He farted so loudly that week that he needed a silencing charm around him most of the day. It didn't help the fire under his cauldron in potion either. Two good pairs of pants ruined.

He got static shocks whenever he touched something or someone. People got even further away. His notebooks became blank, no matter how often he changed his quills and ink. Speaking of quills, they started to explode in yellow canary-like feathers.

A month back from vacation, he was something to look at. He had lost weight. He was wearing Crabbe or Goyle's robe, making him look even smaller. He didn't trust anything in his plate now and had it tested by one of his two sidekicks beforehand. Snape had his hands tied, lacking proof of Harry's guilt. Neither the twins nor Potter were close when most accidents happened.

Draco's hair were dirty. He had bags under his eyes similar to those of Hermione in her worst days. Finally, Draco couldn't take it anymore. He waited for his nemesis to get to his common room, one evening, after class. He saw him chatting with the Weasel, talking about chess. Harry had suddenly gotten better, giving Ron quite a challenge and making games last days. Games that Ron still won, of course. They stopped talking as soon as they saw the Slytherin waiting for them.

"Follow me Potter," the Malfoy heir said plainly.

"Say please," Harry answered back, crossing his arms.

Draco's eyes widen but he managed to utter the pleading word before leading them to a deserted classroom. Harry wordlessly gave Ron his invisibility cloak that he carried around with him. Ron understood. He got under it and stood guard outside the classroom. Draco's eyes widen again, in surprise this time. It was the first time he actually saw the famous cloak he knew Potter had. He got his bearing back quickly enough as Harry closed the door behind Ron. He was a Malfoy after all.

"We have to deal with this, Potter. Man to man. What do you want?" he asked proudly, head held high.

"First off, lower your head, Malfoy. You came here to beg something from me," Harry countered, taking control of the conversation.

Draco swore between his teeth but did as he was told, looking to the side.

"I need an unbreakable vow that what will be said here, stays here. No one else must know."

"What?" squealed Draco.

"On your magic," Harry added in a very serious tone.

"But... you can't make me do that! That's too dangerous!"

"Then you're not sincere. I'll be going now. I have nothing to tell you."

"Wait! Wait!!"

Draco looked torn but seemed to come to a decision. He took a small mirror from his pocket and threw it on the ground. It broke, sending the face of Severus Snape in all directions before the image disappeared.

Harry turned back toward Draco.

"We settle this at six a.m. outside the castle, by the lake, tomorrow. Come alone if you know what's good for you," Harry said, quickly getting out of the classroom that Snape would surely invade in a few seconds.

Ron and Harry ran back to their common room. Of course, Snape could get at them there -he was a teacher after all- but he didn't have enough ground yet to accuse them of anything. They both knew he would be waiting for the big catch. Thus, they had to be careful. They

went to sleep early that evening, in order to be waiting for Draco when he would show up.

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They did wake up early. They got out of the castle by the main door, walking around freely now that there was no more danger of their souls being sucked dry by a Dementor. They all got called back the day Sirius was announced found and innocent. The funniest in this happened when Malfoy tried to scare him during a Care for Magical Creatures class with a Dementor costume, mounted on the shoulders of one of his goons. The Patronus he sent his way in reflex bowled them both over. It was amusing to think he didn't have to lay that trap on Draco: he fell in it on his own.

But today, the air was chilly for the only reason that spring hadn't made its great entry yet, no nightmarish monsters around. March was almost at their door, but the snow was still very present, just as much as the ice on the lake. Harry gave strips of leather to Ron to slip in his boots before leaving the castle. The runes carved objects prevented any footprints. They waited under the invisibility cloak, the sun still hidden beneath the horizon. They finally heard crisp steps ahead. Ron looked at the Marauder Map. It was Draco. Alone.

As soon as he got near them, Ron walked out of the cape, lifting it high above their heads. Harry put a hand on the Slytherin's mouth and pulled him under the cloak. He hushed quietly and let go of Draco. He didn't like touching that guy more than necessary, really. The blond pureblood turned back to face the two Gryffindors, who were too close for his comfort. Harry handed him two leather bands and motioned him to put it in his boots. It wasn't comfortable, but helped greatly for discretion. They walked slowly, Draco not being used to walk under a veiled cloth, with two other peoples at that. Ron and Harry learned long ago not to step on each other's feet but it was a new experience for Draco. They made about twenty steps when Snape passed them in a rush, going for the spot they had just left. Harry frowned at Draco but wordlessly lead them toward the Quidditch pitch. They entered one of the players changing room and finally took the cloak off of them, all of them feeling greatly relieved to

put some distance between each other.. Draco spoke first, feeling the need to explain.

"You can't lie to Professor Snape. Only slightly alter the truth. I told him the meeting was at seven."

Harry smiled sarcastically.

"Word of a Slytherin. The Vow now."

Ron held his wand over both their hands. The vow left no loophole possible. Draco would simply become a muggle if he ever revealed anything about their implication in the pranks or of this very deal without their specific permission. Ron got back outside to his guarding duty with the cloak.

"I hope," began Harry, "...that you realize that it's been twice now in a year that you are facing the consequences of insulting someone."

"What? Who?" asked Draco, clearly confused.

"Buckbeak. Your arm, remember?"

Draco sneered at the painful memory. He got back at the matter at hand. He just had to know...

"How did you do all that?"

"My secret. We're here to negotiate your capitulation. Do we agree on that?" asked Harry.

Draco huffed and turned his back. It took a few seconds but he whispered a small 'yes', his fists closing tight.

"You should be kind of proud, Draco. You managed to push me far enough to take that kind of measures. Still, you have to be ready to face the Lion when you pull on its tail."

Draco left his back turned to him, silent.

"Easter is coming fast." Harry stated on a conversation tone.

Draco finally turned back to face the Gryffindor.

"What does it have to do with anything?"

"Those who want to can go home for Easter's long weekend. Most don't bother. You will. Before Christmas, I planned on asking you to gather info from your father about Sirius Black. It would be kinda pointless now. Instead, you'll tell him that you proposed a deal to me to end the pranks. That he would drop the charge against Buckbeak if I stopped right now and that you let me no other choice."

"That's it?" Draco asked sceptically. And rightly so.

"Dream on. That's the beginning. You'll stop calling Hermione, or anyone else for the matter, a Mudblood, a blood traitor, a half-breed or anything else that hint about one's parents. You wanna talk to someone? Try using his name for a change. You need to vent? To keep up appearances? Okay. Have a go at me as you used to. But any jab at my parents is forbidden. Oh yeah. That's way off limit. And just because you vent on me doesn't mean I won't bite back if you bark loud enough."

Harry looked at him, waiting for an acknowledgment.

"What else?" sighed Draco.

"That's it. For now at least," concluded Harry.

"That's it?" Repeated Draco, dubious. "No last show? No public humiliation?"

"I'm no Slytherin, even if I can plot a good revenge. I didn't do that for fun. Even if it was. I wanted to make a point. Stop harassing people constantly. You start on what I just told you and that's going to be plenty for me. Deal?"

Draco slowly nodded.

"Well then..." started Harry, taking a deep breath. "Look behind your mirror on your bedside. There's a little leather band with a notice-me-not charm on it. We haven't tricked your shampoo this week yet. It's safe to use. You still have two or three explosive quills in your backpack. In the third smallest pocket of that backpack, there is a little piece of wood. That's what's keeping it small. Your inker is the problem for your blank notes pages. Throw it away. There are two more dungbombs in your trunk, one charmed to look like a chewing gum pack."

Draco opened his eyes wider and wider as Harry went on.

"How..."

"I told ya. I won't give away my methods. This is a truce. If you start back on your old detestable behaviour, it'll start all over again. Only this time, I won't hold back."

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Buckbeak was released. Lucius Malfoy simply stated to the press he spent enough money and time on this stupid beast. They just had to let it loose in the woods so they never see it again. It was more than Hagrid could hope for. He actually cried at the news and blew his nose in his carpet. His table cloths were already all damp from the worries he had these past weeks for his 'little angel bird.' He thanked Harry when Hermione told him about his role in all that. He got a nifty box of cookies for his efforts. Harry wondered what kind of damage it could do as a thrown weapon. Maybe if he sharpened their edges and put runes on them... but that would mean finding something harder to sharpen them with.

Draco made himself invisible. Gryffindor house finally got a break. Since his crusade against 'half-blood' and 'Mudblood' ended, most of his lackey stopped their constant efforts to pick on the younger, easier targets. Even the Slytherin house as a whole let out a collective sigh, so to speak, since a good deal of them wasn't as 'pure-blooded' as they said and were considered to be lower in the social ladder. Less insults, bickering and bad jokes led to less resentment. The Slytherin were less hated since they picked less on

others, even if slightly. The twins thought they had their fun for the year on Draco's expense and tuned down the pranks to almost nothing, focussing on their nearby exams, their catching up lessons they never left and a new line of product that they wrote about in a book labelled 'Weasley Productions'. They thanked Harry for providing such an opportunity to test so many products that were simply in the research phase.

"We might need your skill..."

"...to develop a new kind of product..."

"...of unnoticeable pranks, like the one you did..."

"...with theses runic leather bands of yours."

"They were wicked!" they finished together.

"I heard that Rune Carving was a very lucrative business, you know?" stated Harry, looking at his nails. "My work won't come cheap..."

He didn't want to spend all his time carving pranks related runes. He had his own research to do!

The twins looked at each other and turned their backs to Harry in a private, whispered discussion. The whispering ended quickly as they came out with an agreement.

"Welcome in Weasley's Productions, partner!"

Harry laughed out loud at their antics. It could not hurt to keep possibilities open, right? It could be... a fun part-time job. He shook their hands, not realising he just signed, in a way, to be the third parts holder of a future very lucrative company.

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Exams came fast and the Golden Trio was doing well. At least, Harry and Ron were. Hermione... was a mental case. She had so many books around her that Harry considered hiring a librarian to class



them in shelves around her. Her friends began to worry. How was it possible to have so many courses?

"We should do something, mate." Ron told Harry, one evening. "She'll go mental before the exams at this rate. And it's in two weeks!"

Harry nodded, getting to the same conclusion.

"She won't accept to stop working. Forget that. All we can do is...to try and relax her a bit. Make her laugh and then study ourselves, hard, in front of her. At least, she won't worry about our grades."

"Yeah," admitted Ron. "She does that a lot, doesn't she?"

They disappeared a while and came back with a few things from the kitchens. Harry never was happier to have asked the twins where they were at the start of the school year.

They served a steaming cup of black coffee to Hermione and put a plate of fresh chocolate chips cookies just before her. They made some place before her to put down these by taking away the two books she was intensively reading.

"Hey! Don't play games now, guys! I'm... Is that for me?" she finally asked, the delightful aroma of cookies and coffee hitting her nose.

"Yep!" said Ron, taking a look at the book he had in hands. "Ewwww. Arithmancy. What have you got, Harry?"

"Potions," he simply answered.

"Let's switch."

They exchanged books and drew chairs to Hermione's table under her totally confused eyes. She wasn't saying anything for now since a cookie mysteriously made its way in her mouth.

"Okay!" began Ron. "So, you were looking at a potion to cure headaches."

"Hoy! Quiz her hard on that one! I might need that later! God knows I would have needed it this year!" Harry said, searching his own book for stuff to ask to Hermione.

"Quiz me?" squealed Hermione softly after taking a burning sip of her coffee.

"Well, ya! You can't always repeat all the stuff in your head! You'll end up hearing voices like Harry last years!" said Ron, grinning.

"Hey! At least I hear something in my head! Not like someone I know who you could hear the sea if you listened carefully enough near his ears!" quipped back Harry.

The two boys browsed the books, searching for quiz questions to ask their teammate. The poor girl wanted to laugh so badly! But she was so touched by their concern she wanted to cry. Her stressed state didn't help any. She managed to hide a tear or two and took a few good breaths. She stretched, took another cookie and looked at them, defiantly.

"You wanna quiz me? Bring it on!"

The boys looked at her, not believing their ears. Then they grinned.

"You're going to have it now..." said Ron, challenged.

The 'study session' that followed became legendary for the third years. Seeing Hermione confidently answering any and all questions sent toward her, the students of their year gathered around and began asking questions too. It ended with three full tables of people gathered in circle. Of course, Harry and Ron asked a few suckers amongst them. How much does a ridiculous charm weight? How much space in inches square is the wand movement for the cushioning charm using? What's the average support ability of troll's snot of a wand in pounds? What's the difficulty level for transfiguring pumpkin juice into coffee? After that one, she looked, unsure, at the content of her cup. The room exploded in laughter.

Following that evening, Hermione looked a lot more relaxed...and confident. She finally understood she was ready. They didn't see her with more than three books around her, and only one in use.

Ron and Harry learned a lot during that revision too. They all did pretty well. Potion was borderline, though. You can always count on Snape to lurk around and popping out at your side like a devil at the most importune moment. After that exam, Harry let out an exasperated sigh.

"Okay, I know it's childish too say it afterward but I actually understood that potion! I could substitute ingredients by runes in my head and the final result made sense! Why didn't it turn out better?"

Hermione and Ron looked at him strangely.

"What? It's my trick to understand the harder stuff," he defended himself.

"To substitute something hard by something insanely complex?" Ron asked, dubious.

Harry waved his hand dismissingly.

"That is not the point! I haven't forgot even one ingredient! I put them all in the right order! What did I do wrong?" he asked, exasperated.

"Well," started Hermione, nervous, "...your fire wasn't strong enough to dissolve the Polynesian radish crust and you mixed the potion clockwise instead of counter-clock wise... so... you couldn't achieve the full effect."

Hermione was hesitant. She didn't want to vex Harry with her superior knowledge in potions when he did tried hard. She half expected him to burst in an angry rant about insignificants details or to pout in mute silence. She wasn't expecting to see a far-away, wondering look.

"The full... effect. Yes. That is exactly it. Thank you Hermione."

"Err...You're welcome Harry."

The raven haired boy didn't say a word about potions anymore. But he did look a lot in mail ordering pamphlet the next few days.

Too soon, the time to part came. Harry was invited by Ron to come at the Quidditch Cup held in England this year with Hermione. He quickly agreed and told them he would probably go at Sirius's house after that to help him clean up. If he haven't finished doing so yet, that is. It has been a few months after all. He liked the Burrow a lot but he missed his godfather. They understood, remembering how happy Harry was when they came back from Christmas break.

The ride in the Hogwarts Express was joyful, knowing they would see each others soon enough anyway.

Harry's uncle car's was waiting for him at the station. Harry put his trunk... in the trunk. He climbed in the car under the hateful glare of his uncle. Vernon didn't lose time to point a chubby finger toward 'the boy'.

"Now listen here..."

"Uncle. Peoples are watching. This is supposed to be a happy reunion between two family members who haven't seen themselves in a while, isn't it?" interrupted Harry, smiling innocently.

Vernon looked around discreetly and saw the truth in the boy's words. People were watching. They were always watching them... as if they knew... He gave two gentle slaps on Harry's leg, showing a crisp smile that wouldn't fool a blind man and drove off.

"Okay. Now you will listens, boy. You're going to get to your room and stay there unless you've got chores. And to make breakfast. Understood?"

"I would agree... But what will the neighbours think?"

"What?" Vernon asked, his brain unable to follow the magical boy's logic.

"I'm supposed to be a rebel coming back from a disciplinary school. I should either be out, making trouble or showing that my hard education had results. If I'm to stay in my room, they won't know what to expect. Then, rumours will start..."

Vernon was looking straight ahead, seeing reality as Harry pictured it.

"Don't worry, uncle Vernon. I'm going to behave. I won't overdo it though. But... begin to spread the word I had gardening lessons as a part of my disciplinary courses."

Vernon turned half-way, suspicious.

"Why so?"

"Because I'm going to make your lawn, flower beds and trees the most gorgeous things Privet Drive have ever seen."

He turned toward his uncle who was reddening by the seconds.

"Without a wand." He added.

"Without your evil stick?" he asked, suspicious.

"Exactly. You'll see. You won't regret my short presence this summer. Not one bit."

Nyahahaha! What did Harry planned? Is he Neville under polyjuice under a 'growing pair' potion? Stay....tuned...

Author's notes: BETA NEEDED!!! I hope that was clear enough. I thank all the people who have helped me until now. I've had my eyes opened by one harsh but truthful review. If you're curious, it's the long one. Can't mistake it. So I'm asking for a SERIOUS Beta reader. I would give the chapter one week in advance for correction. I'm not giving the full story to anyone to correct in one go. Thank you to all volunteers!

BTW, professor Babbling is a man in this story. Just in case of further confusion.

Disclaimer: Cool! Harry Potter's on sale on ebay! Bid...Bid... WHAT? Outbid already? I let it slip away AGAIN?

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Harry wiped the sweat off his brows, working in his hot room. Many things required his attention simultaneously. The curtains were drawn closed, not as to block the moonlight outside but to hide the glow coming from his small fire. This led to another thing to be cautious about. He had to watch the flames so their heat stayed constant. He bought, as weird as it sounded, a fondue kit. The fuel is a lot more stable than wood, even if more dangerous when spilled.

He took serious security measures. He spread sand and carbonated sodium on the floor, covering the wood beneath his feet. He just swept it in a hidden corner after use. There was a glass vial in a patented holder over the fire that was simmering quietly. Over his head was a blanket he suspended with ropes on the walls, secured by supports he installed. In the day time, they held harmless wall scrolls. The blanket had a simple set of runes designed to filter the smoke into normal air and to stop the smell. The rest was up to him. He had to be deadly silent. No touching two glass vials together. No mumbling under his breath. No dropping anything. If his uncle surprised him like that, the truce would be over and he would be locked in his room. He barely managed to convince him to keep his trunk.

But Harry was having so much fun! The discovery he made could change potion making forever! At least, his potion making. He didn't

know if this knowledge would leave his small circle of friends. He now understood that what he could do wasn't at the reach of most wizards. Only he could make the tools for this to work. And they were many, so... might as well not complicate things right now. It would only hinder his research.

Harry stopped at this thought. His research? Since when was he some kind of scientist? He raised his shoulders, shrugging it off. Whatever. He was having too much fun. After the second week at Privet Drive, Harry's promises began to show. Trees had the most vibrant shade of green and so had the generous, green carpet of thick grass. Vernon bragged to the neighbours he had to repair the lawn mower twice already because it jammed in the thick grass. The flowers were spreading the scent of summer out of their almost shining petals. The bushes that served as fences were as thick as brick walls. Vernon even went and bought two fruit trees to 'add to the decor'. He was patting 'the boy' on the shoulders every times Harry went outside to water the plants and trees with his single sprayer. To the eyes of the neighbours, the problem boy had been broken down just by the look of his serene smile.

Some of them actually went to him to ask about the secret of his newfound green thumb.

"Care, love and understanding of the nature's needs. It takes time and observation."

That was all they got. The boy had such vacant eyes that they wondered if he had found his calling or if he just cracked his nut.

Of course, Harry never spoke of the little additive he put in his sprayer. By taking samples of the trees, the plants, the grass and the flowers, he managed to extract their essences.

He ordered a maddening quantity of thick glass vials and a special metal pen used by Rune Masters. The later was costly as it was made out of several metals joined together in layers, mounted on a handle of wood to allow a cool grip. The tungsten point could become white hot from a strong fire. With this, he could burn runes on the

glass vials. He needed one for each kind of trees, of flowers, of plants. Even one for the grass.

He took a lot of samples during the first days he was back, taking care for them not to leave holes in the yard. In the dead of the night, he installed his makeshift laboratory and put the samples in the runic vials, over the fire. The plants, flowers or grass in the vials decomposed, burning in a show of smoke and left only a smooth looking, liquid-like substance. It was the very essence of what made the plant what it was. An essence deprived of all impurities. Add this to water, and you've got the perfect thing to spray the yard! And did the results showed!

He even tried using it to brew a potion. He started the fire at the right intensity for it to simmer. He put the essence of the needed ingredients in the right order, one after the other, mixing them well. He didn't care to let it simmer too much or change the intensity of the fire. The result was perfect. Even to Harry's untrained eyes, this was a 'grade A' potion. Clear of any superficial substances. He would show Snape next year. Ingredients handling and choosing was part of Potions, wasn't it?

Now, many people would ask: how did he do it? Runes needs to be charged to work, don't they? How did he charged them without his wand triggering the usual warning from the ministry about underage magic?

Easy. He didn't use it. His wand was still locked under the stairs as a proof a good will. He had a promise from his uncle for him to give it back to Harry if he behaved during the summer. Vernon was torn to make such a statement, but having the boy willingly far from his devil stick was very tempting.

So, Harry simply charged them wandlessly. It was hard as hell at first, but now it came to him naturally. He first had to find the pit feeling he had each time he cast a spell. To locate it within him, to reach it and channel it through his index finger on the targeted rune.

Of course, the first time he managed it, he was rewarded with a burn on the tip of his finger and a broken glass vial. He had absolutely no



control and the magical output was way too much. He practiced and finally managed to let out a distinctive amount on each runes. Now, he simply glided his finger over a runeword to light them all in row with infused magical power. Harry though it was a neat trick himself.

Harry tasked himself to alter the entirety of his potion kit to a kit of essences. Some ingredients were producing less than others. He noted the ratio that each ingredients made on their vials to be able to substitute the right amount in potion making. Harry knew he would have to talk to Neville. That guy had a genuine green thumb. The shy boy would be able to give him extremely potent plants, producing more essence. In return, Harry would show him what essence could do to vegetation.

He was working late. The date of him leaving Privet Drive was growing close. He wanted to finish this before he left. More as a matter of principle than of real need. That, and he wanted to concentrate on his rune's studies and researches freely once at Sirius's place.

Damn. That research thought again. Maybe he should purchase a white lab coat while he was at it?

There was the matter of his little trip tomorrow too. He knew he should not do it but...They didn't say he could not leave the house either, now, did they? He had written to the goblins after a stroke of genius. He needed something specific. Something they would be the best to ask for.

Gold.

Not just any gold either. Raw gold. Fresh from the mines, still in rocks. Unmelted. Unworked. It was a strange demand. Harry was aware of it.

But the goblins kept a closer tab on the wizards than he might think. Closer than anyone thought. His request would not be weird. It was uncommon. Rare. But it happened, from time to time. Nicolas Flamel did, while working on the Philosopher's stone. Albus Dumbledore did too, in some secret transfiguration experiment. As far as they could trace them, most great wizards came to them for raw minerals. It held

a lot of raw natural power in that state. They knew it. That's why their best weapons were made out of raw materials, instead of metal bars, like the humans did. That was one of their secrets, one that they didn't share.

But when a human found it on his own, untold by anyone, the goblins helped him and watched. Someone who achieves that kind of comprehension is, as they thought of themselves, in harmony with the nature and the planet.

If ever they find about Harry's collection of essence, they're going to totally freak out and ask him in adoption. Harry had the wits to ask for documentation on how to smelt gold, and how to shape it from raw materials. The goblins were a little bit...disappointed as they reached that part of his letter. He needed help to shape it? If he was a great wizard, didn't he know how already?

Prejudices run deep, even in the goblin society. Especially in the goblin society. To his credit, he was only getting fourteen. Fortunately, an old and clever goblin said in his behalf:

"If this great wizard doesn't know how to smelt, it's the goblins that will show him how, making him an even greater wizard!"

So they choose the most artistic goblin in their ranks, one that painted the walls of his caves for some unknown reason, and told him to write a book to teach a coming fourteen years old boy how to smelt gold. It was no ordinary task. The goblins had no manual. Yes, they had registries, compilation books, inventory archives, but no actual manuals. None expressing ideas in sentences. Lessons were taught from a senior goblins to his apprentice. And smelting... that was part of them! How to handle gold? They knew how the first time an adult put a pick and a shovel in their hands...at the age of five!

The poor green guy got a headache, a depression and became hysteric...one after the other... in the same hour. It was an order, and, as such, he could only obey. Then he had an idea. He would act as if the boy was in front of him, telling him what to do. But instead of saying the words out loud, he would take them and write them down on a parchment! He was a genius!!! He feverously, sweating, got to

his task, laughing maniacally once and then. The goblins that passed by his office were glad to see such a model of mental stability in one of their kind.

Harry never learned of the turmoil he triggered in Gringott. The goblins were, after all, businessmen. When Harry went to Gringott the next day, using the Knight Bus as the sun was setting while everyone was busy in front of their TV, he went to Diagon Alley. He walked straight to Gringott to be back as soon as possible.

The goblin serving him seemed...restless. And more polite. No, not more polite. The words seemed more...sincere. Less strained and robotic. Harry thanked him warmly, putting under his arm the box containing the gold ore and the book. He was about to go when the goblin seemed to want to add something. Harry stopped, and waited, a foot pointing towards the exit. The goblin lowered himself from his perch and Harry closed the distance further to hear the whispered confidence.

"Mr. Potter. Simply for your...information. Well... we mine other kinds of... metals too. Like silver, iron and...other more... special ones."

Harry's mind went swirling. Possibilities, ideas, items and designs rushed in his head at the speed of thought. The goblin seemed to see right through him as he smiled. He did well telling him. His eyes told volume to the green clerk. Harry was one of those great wizards.

"Well, in this case..." began Harry slowly, licking his lips, "...maybe you could discreetly send me...samples... at Hogwarts so that I can check that out myself. I'm sure you'll be reasonable in your prices. I trust you. I'd even say that you could check out with professor Babbling at Hogwarts about my proficiency in Runes. I might be of great service to you later."

The goblin nodded slowly and straightened his back against his chair. When Harry Potter left Gringott, the clerk left his post in a hurry, rushing to the Supervisor of the bank. He knocked once and got in his office at once. He was expected anyway. The Supervisor asked greedily - as if the goblins knew any other way- how it went.

"Master Riplock. I proposed it to him. As you suggested. His eyes and face showed no greed, no thirst for riches. It was the thirst for knowledge. He was almost shaking with excitement!"

The Master leaned back in his seat, satisfied.

"But that's not all." Added the exited clerk.

"Tell me." The master simply ordered.

"He said he could be of use to us later! To check his talent in Ancient Runes with his teacher, he said."

"RUNES YOU SAID?" yelled the Supervisor.

The clerk nodded eagerly.

"If he mentioned it, then it must be his strongest point. At that age, humans can't help but to brag. So, if he's a great wizard, a Rune Master at that... We must watch him closely. We MUST! The shame of two years ago must NEVER repeat itself. Having a vault open and allowing the thief to escape...It is unacceptable, even if the vault was empty. We must update the century old security system. Dragons and locks aren't enough anymore. Ancient Runes are eternal, unless broken. Good Curse Breakers are hard to find, almost as rare as good Rune Carvers. History showed it takes a Rune Breaker as good or better than the Rune Carver that did the work to get passed the defence of a place. Young Mr. Potter was right. He might be of future use."

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For once, it wasn't all that hard to pretend to be a happy little family. Petunia hugged Harry sincerely. One would have noticed that by hugging him, her head was over his shoulder and looking at the lawn and garden of envy of the neighbourhood. That and the fact that Harry left 'nutrients' for each plant with instructions of how to use them to keep the vegetation that way until winter. Harry only regretted not being able to see what it would look like in autumn. Oh well. If he hurried enough, he might be able to do it at Hogwarts.

Vernon was glad, since the boy was going away without a single incident of weirdness. And Dudley... well... he was acting through his ass. He hadn't had the opportunity to hit him even once this summer. So he took the occasion to give him a 'friendly clap' on the shoulder that almost sent Harry on the ground. Harry did the same, without the strength behind it, whispering to his ears:

"Careful here, Big D. Next year, vines could find their way in your bedroom while you're asleep..."

That calmed him. Harry waved goodbye and put his trunk... in the car. They agreed it would be better for him to travel the 'normal people way' out of Privet Drive. Vernon would drop him in London, near the Leaky Cauldron, and he planned to use the Floo to the Burrow from there. The Quiddich Tournament was only in a few days. He would get to the Black Manor after the match for the rest of the vacation. This course of action was agreed by owl over the last month. Ron's new owl, a gift from Sirius, was quite the small ball of enthusiasm.

Travel with his uncle was smooth. Vernon was even humming a tune. That was why Harry wished his uncle a good year and a 'see ya in ten months' as he left the car. Vernon nodded gravely. That was the warmest farewell he ever had from him. Harry was a little bit touched.

Harry rolled his wheeled trunk inside the WIZARDING pub, greeted Tom and dropped a sickle on the counter to use the fireplace. Finally, he was back in the world he felt he belonged.

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The match was grand. The Bulgarians, the Irish, the butterbeer, the forest of tents, the Veelas, Ludo Bagman...it was the kind of moment that goes in a blur, as if he was half-asleep. But the muggle aggression, the masked Death Eaters, the temporary disappearance of his wand, the dark stranger, the floating Dark Mark and almost getting stupefied by twenty officials...that went fast as well but dragged in itself too. Like...something you can't keep up with.

At least, all of this wasn't a big conspiracy to get to Harry. He was simply one of the numerous people who were dragged into this mess. That's why his two best friends didn't try to stop him when he said he was still going at Grimmauld Place. Harry told Ron and Hermione to forget the Death Eaters for now. Without their Lord, they were just a washed up organisation that liked to cause trouble. He would send Draco spying on this when they got back to school. They found it funny that Harry already had a spy in the enemy faction. Even if Hermione stated that the Slytherins were not 'enemies', just different. Good old 'Mione...

Grimmauld place was not what Harry imagined at all. Sirius had eight months to get the place in order. He was greeted by a screech, a hostile armour suit and a flight of bats. Bats? Inside? What the heck?!

"Have I stumbled on Dracula's summer cot, Mr. Black, or did I just miss Snape's visit?" Harry asked sarcastically, placing his trunk against a wall.

Sirius laughed...well more like barked of mirth. Way too long in that dog body, Harry mused.

"God, you inherited your father's sense of humour! We disliked that stick of grease too."

"Well then," Harry began, looking around, "I did well to come here. You'll need all the help you can get."

"Yes...well...I tried to hire a maid but, as an ex-convict, they aren't pushing at my door."

"Maybe you shouldn't have put 'Young witch wanted to clean my mansion. I provide the uniform and tools.' in the add."

"What?!" almost yelled Sirius indignantly.

Harry could not help but to laugh.

"Know that I only stipulated 'young witch' in all you said!" Sirius almost pouted.

That sent Harry in yet another fit of laughter. Then the screaming started again. Sirius damned the place and went to draw the curtains above a portrait closed. Harry stopped him and examined it. It was the picture of a very noble lady, very strict looking in a beautiful, classical robe. It would have been a beautiful piece of art if it was not that she screamed and howled at the top of her magical, inconsistent lungs some pureblood fascist-like insults.

"I introduce you to Ms. Black, Harry. My dear mother." Said Sirius loudly, acting as if they were not showered in insults and death threats.

Harry looked at the portrait in detail and examined it close up everywhere.

"Don't bother, Harry. I've tried everything. This thing must have a permanent sticking charm to the very structure of the wall. If it wasn't a support wall, I would have blasted the bloody thing off."

But Harry found what he searched for.

"BLOOD TRAITORS! MUDBLOOD LOVERS!"

Harry smiled broadly and looked at the lady in the painting in the eyes with an intense glare. Then, he spoke softly.

"You have the Power Word and Control Sentence for the whole mansion, don't you?"

That shut the portrait up. She even looked scared. Sirius was impressed. The only time he managed that, he called her an 'unfit mother' and that sent her in a row two seconds later.

"Yes... That's funny." Harry kept on. "I see a tripping jinx on that troll leg umbrella holder, a compelling charm for dark guardians... And light veiling on the whole place, dimming any sources of light. To keep a light tone of skin maybe? Hummm. Environment control for...snakes? Spiders? That's kind of unnecessary. And then, there's

you. Kinetic function and a sonorous charm built into the painting. And something else..."

Harry went to his trunk and began installing his rune working kit quite comfortably, under the watchful eyes of Sirius, both curious and amused. What was his nephew doing? Where did he get all that? Nonetheless, the portrait of his mother was scared shitless.

"What...what are you doing? BLOOD TRAITOR!!"

Harry winced at the volume of the voice.

"Keep it down. Or I might destroy you by mistake."

"W-w-w-what?" she stuttered. He looked so sure. She was only a pale shadow of the real Ms. Black, but she had a basic conscience and some self-preservation.

Harry installed his small fire kit and the flame burned a strong blue at once. Harry put the tip of his rune pen in the flame, turning the tip patiently, looking at the metal changing colour.

"It was a smart thing, you know, to carve runes in the frame of your portrait. And to make it look like simple decorations with paint. Altering their looks was simply brilliant. But carved runes are just that. Carved. A groove will always betray their position. Now, I don't want to destroy you. Only alter some undesirable parts. The powering set is crude, but efficient. We could use it for something useful actually. Like self dusting charms and lights ones. Let's begin your cleansing now, shall we?"

The portrait gasped as it felt its structure change. The environmental control for dark creatures was gone.

"And this..." trailed Harry, burning the frame from the point of his pen, simply cutting the link of the rune to the main cluster, making it look like just another ornament.

Another part of her fell. The compelling charm for dark guardians.



"Fool! Those creatures will run rampant in the manor!" yelled Ms. Black.

"Too bad for them. We're big boys. I killed a basilisk once. What worse can you do?" said Harry, warming back his pen.

"A basilisk? Really?!" asked Sirius, shocked and impressed. Chances to meet one in his whole life were slim to none, even if he were to travel the dark forests of the world. His chances of survival if he did find one were even lower...

Harry nodded distantly before getting back to work.

"Second year. Controlled by Tom Riddle's diary, trying to return from the dead. Or the undead."

"Who?"

"Tom Riddle, aka lord Voldemort."

That news put ice in the vein of Lord Black. Voldemort tried to return thank to a book? And Harry stopped him and his pet basilisk alone? Who WAS he really?!

"Another down," said Harry as Ms. Black was thoughtfully panicked now. She just lost her ability to move the curtain open. That and everything else. They could block her up at will.

"Young man, please, even if you're a Mudblood, you can't do this."

"I sure can and I will. There, there. Almost finished. One last thing..." and Harry altered one more rune, before putting his pen away. Ms. Black felt the equivalent of a pinch while she closed her eyes. She opened one after a few seconds. And another. She was still there. She sighed.

"What did you do?" she asked, using a soft voice Sirius didn't know of her. She paused and seemed to run some introspection test routine. She was quite surprised to see that something else than her had been removed, and that she was whole for the first time.

"Easy. There was something else than just an imprint of you. It was...how could I explain that...a rune that represented everything dark. It was directly beside your cognitive faculty in a way. So you could only think in a dark way. The guy who did this took a chance. Isn't it the worst way to remember someone? Everyone is made of dark and light. I just liberated the light in you."

Harry took down the curtain.

"We won't need that anymore. You're part of this house, and one of the remaining prides of the Noble and Ancient House of Black. Now that you are free of your dark compulsions, you'll agree that being a Black doesn't mean to become an assassin and taking the risk to be killed by your own Master."

"Of course!" the portrait said. She seemed to begin pondering how much that dark rune changed her.

Harry looked at her, then at Sirius.

"Was she a loving mother to you?" asked the young Gryffindor.

"Not by a long shot. Not to me. She was like the portrait was before, only more...intelligent. This is a new Ms. Black I have before me. One...I would have liked to call Mother, I think." He finished dreamingly.

The portrait didn't miss that and turned her head away. Harry, as he now always did when faced to a puzzle, imagined the runes turning in his head. A good part of the solution appeared to him. It was possible...

"From the little I know about portraits, they are exactly as the person was when she was alive. No deception possible. This must be how your mother really was. She acted the way you remember... for some reason. Maybe she made life unbearable for you so that you would leave a house that would have turned you into a murderer, who might have corrupted you to the dark. Or killed you. They must have

realized that when the painting was done. They had to simulate her evil acting. How...how did your mother die, Sirius?"

Sirius thought back far, far away.

"I can't remember. But it was...soon after this was made." Finished Sirius, looking back at the painting.

Harry saw something from the corner of his eyes and paled. His face changed to become resolute. He closed his eyes, raised his wand and yelled:

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A silver stag shot from his wand and bowled the two dementors approaching from the hallway. They tripped on their long, ragged cloak and landed hard on their ass. Harry almost laughed from relief but thought of something else and cast another simple charm.

"Ridiculous."

The two dark creatures turned into twin images of Draco Malfoy in leather suit. Harry laughed so hard he fell on his knees. It was more than enough to turn both dark creatures into smoke. Harry, the hilarious images gone, managed to get back on his feet, still chuckling. He turned toward Sirius who was still a little pale. Harry realized that the dementors must be both their deepest fear, as Sirius passed twelve years in Azkaban. The images must have been quite strong. Due to his training last Christmas, Harry simply reacted to them.

"That was... some nice wand work, Harry. Mine is still in my pocket. A corporal Patronus? A stag? It was just like your father's! Prong roams again..." said Sirius, a strange smile playing on his lips.

Harry frowned. It was a nice compliment but...

"No, Sirius. Prong is dead with my father." Said Harry with finality. It hurt him to do so, but since the day he could understand what was

told to him, he knew his parents were dead. He came to term with it, somewhat. Even if he knew it'll always be a sore spot.

"I'm Harry. It's normal that I look like my dad. I'm his son. But that's it. If I ever name my Patronus, it won't be Prong. He'll have his own name. Please, Sirius. Remember me for me. Not for some... James look-alike."

A shadow passed over Sirius's face. He nodded. It was hard for him. Right after Lily's and James's death, he was put in a hell pit. Out of it, blinded by vengeance, he let his darkest side take over. Now, he could finally resume his life. He lacked twelve years worth of experience, which left him barely more mature than a twenty and some year old. He could finally live, and grieve. But it wasn't that easy. Having Harry around was both a blessing and a curse. He'd always remind him of his lost best friends.

He'll have to will that out of his head. Harry, as mature as he looked, was HIS charge, not the other way around! Yet, what Harry did for him outdid anything he ever did for his nephew. He was the adult. He had to get his footing back. That didn't mean they could not be...pals. He wasn't his father after all! He didn't have to try and acts like it either! He decided he would rather play the role of the rogue godfather that will influence him to do the stupidest thing he would remember fondly later in life. He wondered if he ever tasted Firewhisky...

"Okay, Harry. My apologies. Now. After seeing your nifty wand work, we'll patrol the mansion a few times and get rid of the unwanted presences. I wonder if I could use Kreacher as a decoy..."

"Kreacher?"

"House elf. Insane. Too much of old Ms. Black speeches."

"So he listens to Ms. Black?" asked Harry, pondering.

"Listen?! He worships her!" answered Sirius, sardonic.

"Excellent. Call him. If you don't mind... well... could you tell him to obey me?"

Sirius laughed heartily at Harry's shyness and howled.

"KREATCHER!"

The house elf, definitely mad, appeared, muttering things about blood traitor and half-breed infesting the place.

"Stupid elf! Listen! Harry here is a Master of the House, like me. He's my heir. You'd better listen and obey him like you would to me."

"Of course, Mr. Black. Anything, Mr. Black." Then, muttering to himself loudly: "Muggle lover bringing half-breeds. If mistress was to know..."

Sirius was about to raise his hand but Harry had a much better idea. He crouches down and pulled the now rigid elf in a hug.

"Thank gods, you're here, Kreacher! You know, I'm a cousin of the Blacks."

The creature seemed to look at him, uncertain, leaving for a moment his insanity somewhere else.

"Yes, Kreacher! My name is Potter! I never knew my parents. I was raised by muggles and it was so horrible!"

Harry didn't even have to fake that part. The elf looked at him with angry eyes at first, hearing the Potter name, and then they got filled with sadness and pity, hearing of his horrible fate.

"Muggles...How horrible...poor young Master..."

Harry nodded, wiping an imaginary tear.

"Yes! But it got even worst when I got here! I thought I came back to the House of my ancestors, the rich Black Manor, the jewel of our

family! The cradle of the true Wizarding society! But...this is what I find..."

And Harry gestured around. Kreacher looked too, as if for the first time. He pulled on his long ears, not believing it himself.

"Even Ms. Black, here, was left unchecked..." he started but the elf turned sharply and screeched desperately:

"I POLISHED HER EVERYDAY!!!"

Harry almost jumped back but stayed near the hyperventilating house elf, making calming gestures.

"By wizards, Kreacher. Some maintenance had to be made. She became a dark, twisted version of herself." Explained Harry.

The poor thing looked at the portrait for support but, finding Ms. Black nodding at Harry's words, lost all composure. He began to wail, rivers streaming from his eyes. He failed. He failed in everything. Harry took him in his arm once again, patting his back. Sirius was lost. Where was the aggressive, dark servant?

"Hush, Kreacher, hush. Dry your tears. The House of Black will live again, in its former glory."

The house elf hiccupped and looked at Harry with big round eyes.

"It... it will?"

Harry grabbed him by the shoulder firmly, without squeezing, to communicate his assurance and certitude.

"It will. A Master came back to the House. A ...heir ...too. The wisdom of Ms. Black has been restored. It's all we need. We'll get the manor as it was in its former glory."

"But... Master is a bad Master!" he answered, confused.

Before Harry could find a suitable reply, Ms. Black spoke in a soft voice.

"No, Kreature. Sirius is a good Master. He is the kind of Master we should've always had. The House's ways erred, Kreature. We have much to do to regain our dignity. Work well with Master Sirius. He will reward you with his trust, like the good house elf that you'll become."

The elf left Harry's arm and softly went to the portrait. Lady Black held her hand open near the bottom of the picture and Kreature pressed his cheek against it, a gentle caress that breached their two worlds. He cried. Ms. Black told him soft soothing words.

Sirius, hardly getting his eyes off of his mother, gestured to Harry and they left them alone. Sirius was pensive, but serene.

"Harry...I'll never thank you enough for this. Never." He said softly.

They drew their wands. It was time to cleanse the place of all darkness.

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I hope you didn't run out of tissue! I always thought the Slytherin to be manipulative. Ms. Black seemed to have some intelligence, so she should have planned something against her son going to the light side if she was really that evil. That was my answer to that. R&R!

Author Notes: Got my BETA! Thanks a lot to ErikArden, my brand new spell-checker who's going to shape my sloppy writing into something worth reading! Cheers!

Disclaimer: Somewhere, in another dimension...

Harry Potter: "I... do not own.. the rights... to the fictional character Tigerman. Here we go. Humpf. I bet we only have this kind of problem in this world..."

It took skill, and stamina. They had both. That, and a good drive from Harry's little speech about regaining the dignity of the House of Black. It started now. Sirius had more experience with dark creatures and knowledge about them, but Harry had power in spades and the ability to adjust to any foe, however overwhelmed he seemed. Sirius had never seen such power in a young man. He probably had even more than himself! He was only a teen, even if in good shape from Quidditch. But Harry learned quite a few spells the year prior and practiced a lot.

Harry didn't think about it when coming into Black Manor, but he started using his wand naturally. Horrified of what he'd done at first, he told Sirius. His godfather reassured him that he could use magic whenever he wanted here as the manor was under a Fidelius charm. They were warded through and through. Harry decided to check them out sometime to see if he could add some runic defences to said protections. He practiced the spider repelling charm he learned in second year so much he found he could herd them in the direction he wanted now. Sirius was laughing like mad when Harry found a nest, split the beam in many directions at the same time, sending the spiders in a choreographed dance that ended up in them piling themselves up in a tower to avoid the burning beams. Some were so big he wondered if they were related to Aragog.

The snakes were easier to deal with. He simply ordered them to get out of the house and patrol for spiders and enemies of the house. Sirius was a little freaked out by that.



"Parseltongue?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah."

"When did you find out?"

"I had a really busy second year."

"Oh," and they left it at that.

A more serious threat crossed them in the form of two ghouls. They were not as friendly as the one in Ron's house, more like the flesh-ripping kind. They were part of the house's defence system, but were released when Harry cancelled Mrs. Black's control runes. That gave Harry the occasion of practicing his Protego spell. It wasn't very good at first, but it had to be at the end, since they were way faster than what they should have been after years unfed. They must have been charmed to be faster. Hopefully there was no dragon, he thought sarcastically. He shared his musing with his godfather who found that very funny.

"If you ever face a dragon, throw a conjunctivitis curse in his eyes and run the hell away, if you can't apparate already."

Harry was glad to have a godfather so full of wisdom. Even a brave Gryffindor knew when he had to flee.

As they cleared the place, they met a very dusty Kreacher. He was washing like there was no tomorrow. Even Sirius had some pity at the sight.

"Kreacher! Slow down! Don't wear yourself out! We still need you." He said.

The house elf looked up at him with newfound respect in his eyes.

"Master...worry about Kreacher? After all Kreacher said to Master? Kreacher... is not worthy... KREACHER WON'T FAIL YOU!!!"

The semi-psychotic elf brushed the wall with renewed vigour. Sirius was put off by that, he asked the exact opposite!

"Don't worry, Sirius, I think...part of the house elf magic comes from the master. The better the relationship, the stronger he'll be." Said Harry, shrugging.

Sirius smiled and half-joked, "Then I hope he doesn't wear me out!"

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Harry and Sirius went to Diagon Alley for the annual shopping trip, meeting the Weasleys and Hermione along the way. For once, things were quiet. A little too quiet, in fact. There were more aurors than there had ever been before.

"The Death Eater attack after the Quidditch match." Arthur Weasley simply explained to Harry.

Harry was angry. Just when thing got better, those masked dumb-asses had to put on a performance. While they walked, Sirius talked a little to Harry.

"By the way, don't worry about Hogsmeade. I gave an authorization to Minerva."

"Thanks, Sirius." Harry said, sincerely happy. 'No more sneaking under the cloak!' Harry thought.

"Even if I don't know if you'll be using it much. Things will get interesting enough." He added with a smile.

"Sirius." Berated Arthur. Even then, he had a small smile of his own.

"Interesting?" asked Harry.

"Don't worry, Harry. Dumbledore will probably announce it at the welcoming feast." Sirius said, grinning.

"Don't taunt them, Sirius." Said Molly Weasley, stern.

"Oh! That! I know about it already." Said Harry, waving it off.

Sirius looked at him, surprised.

"How come?"

"You're a heavy sleep talker, you know? 'Hogwarts... He's at Hogwarts..." Harry mimed a sleeping, if a little bit deranged man.

Sirius got redder by the second. The adults smiled, shaking their heads as the younger ones laughed.

"It's going to be grand. I wonder how long it'll last." Said Harry, looking up.

"All year long, according to the Headmaster. The Tri-Wizard tournament has always been three tasks, spread all over the course of a year." Sirius said matter-of-factly.

Ron, Hermione, Ginny and the Weasley twins gasped as they heard that. Sirius turned white.

"Don't tell me you lot didn't know yet. Harry hasn't told you?"

"Of course not!" said Harry, grinning. "You sleep with a locked door, remember? How could I hear anything?!"

Sirius turned from white to beet red again. He hid his face in his hands while everybody laughed at his expense. Except Ms. Weasley who was frowning angrily at him.

"I've been had by a fourth year! The Marauders have sunk so very low..." he said, pretending to cry.

"So...What's a tri-Wizard Tournament?" asked Harry in a conversational tone.

"Well..." began Hermione.

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The welcoming feast was festive, to say the least. The announcement was greeted with a lot of cheers, but Harry was frowning. No Quidditch? That wasn't fair at all! He sighed. He could use the time to work on his projects but... He would have to go flying now and then, it always eased his mind. He felt he'd never get tired of using his Firebolt.

He hasn't had the time to open the strange, goblin written book yet. Too much to do at the manor. At least, now, it was liveable. He would have to talk to Neville too. He wanted to take advantage of this time of the year to take essence of ripe fruits amongst other things.

Hermione was back with a normal schedule, now that she realized she wasn't wonder woman. Harry still had to find out how she passed so many classes she never attended. His new analytic mind told him she could have done so only by being at two places, even three, at the same time, which was impossible, of course, even for a wizard.

Harry began thinking. A clone...that could act on his own and gain experience ... then merge back with the original, giving him all the knowledge...

...

Nah.

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That term start was the best Harry ever had, he wasn't the center of attention! It seems that after three full years, now starting a fourth, people got used to the 'boy-who-lived.' Of course, there was always the first years. But you can't have it all. Beside, the Tournament took most of the school's gossip off of him. He was, finally, having a normal time at school. Even professor Flitwick noticed his wand work was more fluid and focused. He congratulated him for the mastery of the 'Accio' spell within the allowed class time. At first, he had no result at all. He said that if the points system had been in place this year, he would have rewarded him with ten. It was rare enough that he was

proud of it. Ron rolled his eyes at Harry's wide smile. Of course, the ginger boy still had to have results.

Harry hadn't told his friends about his summer projects. He felt a...resistance... telling them. He didn't know why. Like this small voice telling him this wasn't a good idea. That little voice he never listens since, most of the time, he didn't have the time to think. He would try this time. To follow this voice, instinct, conscience...whatever.

Neville was ecstatic though. He asked Harry, mere hours after spraying an ordinary flower with essence that Harry already collected from Privet drive, what it was. He showed the flower in question to his fellow Gryffindor. Harry looked and had yet to see anything. He asked Neville what he was supposed to be seeing.

"What? Don't you see?! Look at the petals! It's as if they just came out! They gained some thickness, so they're holding strongly while they were hanging lower before, showing they were already two day and a half old! The two leaves here almost shine!" he babbled without a single stutter, uncharacteristically excited.

Harry looked at Neville with a little knowing smile. 'Oh yeah. Gardening was his gift.' The shy Gryffindor felt the stare and saw Harry from the corner of his eyes. His frame seemed to shrink a little on himself.

"S-sorry mate, I g-guess I got carried away. It's not that big a deal in fact, really. Almost unnoticeable..."

Harry's smile disappeared. What was he apologizing for? It took him a moment before clarity struck, and suddenly he understood.

Neville had a gift. His talent for Herbology probably made many a person jealous. With such a noticeable talent in Runes, other people tended to feel as though Harry was trying to humiliate them and got angry. They didn't tease him because of his fame, but Neville was fair game. Neville was most likely always at odds with his jealous classmates who teased him in order to make up for their own deficiency. It was this reason that his conscious had warned him not

to share his project with Ron and Hermione. Ron's tendency to get jealous had sprouted one too many times for Harry to be comfortable showing any other abilities, and it would have been too difficult to tell Hermione and not his red-headed friend. Harry figured out that jealousy was the reason most great wizards were alone and apathetic.

"I'll take your word for it, Neville. But don't fawn too much on this early result. Freshening a two days old flower is good, but wait a few days! I'm telling you, I transformed the garden back at my muggle place into a king's garden!"

Neville looked at him, relieved and smiling. He wasn't going to him mock about his 'only talent' as most said.

"Really? I'd love to see that!"

"You will, Neville. You will. Right here. But I'll need your help."

"Help from me?" he asked, surprised.

"Of course! You're simply the best around in Herbology. All years combined, you're the best, and I need the best."

Neville seemed a little uncomfortable at first, but then looked at him seriously. "What do you need me for?" he asked

"I need samples. The more you give me, the better. Essences don't take much space. I need samplings of mature, healthy trees of every kind. Samples of ripe fruit, perfect ones, ready to be eaten. Of growing ones. Of vegetables, magical plants and potion ingredients in their raw state. What you saw here..." he said, waving at the flower, "is the shadow of the tip of the iceberg. I'm on something huge, and for the help you're going to give me, I'll let you in on it. I'm willing to show you my secret, in due time. Don't think of it as a second hand secret. Neither Ron nor Hermione know about it. I don't intent to show them either."

Neville's breath caught in his throat, not even his two best friends? The Longbottom understood this was on a whole new level of business. He had only dreamed of something like this before,

something that would take the very best of his abilities. His skills were still developing, but with this new summit to reach... He was almost shaking with eagerness.

"I'm in, Harry. If it's even half as grand as you make it sound, it's going to be a blast having you as a partner."

Harry smiled and offered Neville his hand. The boy, looking more comfortable than Harry ever remembered, shook it with no hesitation at all.

"Now," said Harry casually, "...we can't possibly mix our experiment with the other greenhouses. There is more than enough space for another one. I think the 'Potter Foundation' will make the gift of a greenhouse to Hogwarts."

Neville's eyes bugged open.

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The Headmaster was thrilled at the idea as Professor Sprout can always use more space to keep more...sprouts...in winter. The 'condition' for the donation was that the building would be for Harry's personal use for the next four years. It was very reasonable seeing how long they'll be using it after that. The Herbology teacher almost kissed the boy, but settle for a hug. She contacted the magical glass makers at once for a medium sized greenhouse. Seeing that, Harry asked the see the plans. He ordered the size to be multiply by two. No sense in letting money sleep in his vault. He wasn't the richest boy alive, not by a long shot. But he figured he would still have enough funds for three whole tuitions at Hogwarts after he bought the greenhouse. Even if his trust vault was the only one he had.

He'd asked the goblins once when he met them, since this was a 'Trust Vault', did it mean he had a 'Family vault'? Of course not. This was the Potter vault, changed to a trust vault at the death of his parents. It was all of their savings. They were quite reasonable peoples. Harry was glad of that. It meant he wasn't rich. If he got rich, it would be of his own doing. He owed at least that to his parents, he

mused once. To take the chance at life they gave him, and become the best he could.

Time went by smoothly. His schedule was spread between his friends, going to his new greenhouse that was built in only a few days and studying his runes skills, always finding something new and fascinating to check out, opening new opportunities.

Harry realized that contractors were far more efficient in the Magical world than in the muggle one. He smiled thinking it took magic for them to finish on time though. He installed his burner in a corner with a small rune lab. Neville was quite curious but didn't ask a thing. Harry said he'd tell him when the time would come.

Then, the goblin's happened. 'Those goblins!' thought Harry more than once. He asked for samples, did he? Well, he got them. One morning, the Great Hall's door opened wide, letting the end of September wind carry a hippogriff inside. A bloody hippogriff! He simply flew in, as if it was the most normal thing to do, and landed in front of Harry, at the other side of the breakfast table. Harry was shocked, paralysed, as everyone else was in the school. He got his wits back, got around the table and faced the winged creature who turned around, following to face to him. Harry stopped, a few paces from him, and bowed low, looking the noble looking beast in the eyes.

The beast waited a second or two, and bowed back. Harry went to the package, (more like a bloody crate!) that was secured to its leg, even if he carried it with his talons. He didn't know if they had to be treated like post owls, but he took no chances. Taking a huge bowl of fuming bacon on the table, he presented it at the beast's head level. It didn't last long. The hybrid bird bowed slightly again and went away. All that was left was a stunned Boy-who-lived with an empty bacon bowl hanging from a hand and a very big, heavy-looking crate at his feet. Surprisingly, Hagrid was the one to break the silence.

"THAT'S the way to handle a hippogriff! Way to go, Harry!"

He began clapping loudly. The Headmaster followed suite quickly, amused. Soon, the whole school was clapping at Harry. Except one table, of course. The apocalypse wasn't on them yet so Slytherin



wouldn't cheer for Harry. The following days were full of teasing about 'oversized owls' and asking if he planned to have a giant as a house elf later. Harry laughed it off. After all, thinking about it, it was funny! For once, people did so without malice. Most of them did anyway. Some Slytherin asked if it was his mother carrying his rock bed since he forgot it at home. Hermione smartly told them it could be so since Griffins had rock bed, not hippogriff.

Coincidentally, it was rocks in that crate. It took the help of a few house elves to carry it to the greenhouse, the only place he could work in peace. The crate itself was built as a desk drawer to allow the different compartments easy access to the groups of samples. They were sitting in straw, with a small info card telling what each of them was, their magical and mechanical properties with their most common uses, and their most uncommon uses. He had about two dozens different metals. And some crystals. Harry knew this was going to be fun, but also a long term project.

He figured it was time to give a shot at reading the goblin written book but soon found out it was quite a pain. The guy wrote that as if Harry was there, sitting next to him! Complete with quiz questions and insults since he didn't answer them! Hopefully, he gave the answers too since nobody was there to tell them. Some concepts were quite strange, like the 'hit'. He seemed to mean something specific with that term. As if hitting a rock would tell you all about it and what was directly behind it! As if he could do that! The goblin tried his hardest to explain, as the sweat marks on the ink indicated.

Smelting gold in itself seemed simple enough in theory. You take the rock, put it in a foundry cauldron, heat it to an insanely high, but precise, temperature, get rid of the floating impurities on a surface many time hotter than fire itself and delicately casting it in a mould, giving the gold the shape you're searching for. The best sands to make said mould were specified. The kind of tool to use too. The powder to get the fire to the right temperature. The author was quite thorough. The question was: would he have the guts to do it? It was dangerous, there was no saying otherwise. Smelting, using a foundry...it wasn't taught here. No teacher, to his knowledge, had any idea how to do this. When they needed something, they simply transfigured it. To Harry, that was far from convenient.

Thankfully, he didn't plan on making some heavy sword or a piece of plate armour. He wrote to the goblins, again. They gave him, along with the crate, the name of a goblin he could directly communicate for further orders of the kind. He put great care, this time, to ask the delivery to be made at the biggest of Hogwarts's greenhouse, during one of his free periods.

His rune classes were pure joy now. He was in the same as Hermione! He listened attentively. But he felt...traitorous. They all worked so hard on their Quadrant Cases for their three runes word. The class halved since last year. The dropout rate was insane. The highest of all the courses. In private, he showed some of his most private work to the teacher. A five rune word he used for one of his pranks last year. The one that shrunk the bag of Draco. To his eyes, it was crude and basic. To the teacher's eyes, it looked like a promising future. The runes were not all that well strung together, but worked quite well. He would have a NEWT passing grade with this probably a good 'A'. He asked him, with some regret in his voice, if he wanted to skip classes and go directly to his seventh year. Harry refused. His teacher nervously laughed, saying that showing him this, he already passed the end of year exam. So, Harry decided to make a deal. He would make a project, something big, to work on during classes. It would be his OWL project, one year early. Then, if it worked well, would do the same for his NEWT. But he would keep the subject secret, same for the progresses. Professor Babbling didn't have to think more than one second to agree.

"What kind of project are you thinking of?" he asked.

"I have no idea! I was making this up as it went!" Harry answered truthfully.

Professor Babbling laughed at that, and gave him a month to present a valid idea for a project along with a summary of his objectives.

Ron and Hermione began to wonder what Harry was doing with all of his time. He simply stated it was 'personal projects', something 'boring and not that special'. Ron kept giving him odd looks. Harry was used to keeping dark secrets before, but this didn't seem to be

one. Why was he hiding this from him? And Hermione for the matter? This was why, one day, he reacted the way he did.

Harry came to him one day at dinner.

"Ron. I'll need you as a watchman like last year. It's time to pay Malfoy a visit."

"Now you need my help, do you?" he grumbled.

"What?" Harry asked, confused.

"So you're going to make secret deal again? Not even telling me what they are, making me wait outside like a Crabbe or Goyle?"

"What's with you, Ron? If you wanted to know what I was going to say to Malfoy I would have told you! Didn't I tell you all about the pranks? You know I wouldn't have gone that far in the Slytherin common room without you!" Harry whispered harshly.

"Yeah...well what are you doing with your days then?" Ron ask, frustrated. "What are all those blank covered books you read, the stuff you get by bloody hippogriff? From the goblins nonetheless! All that... stuff...in your greenhouse? Even Neville said it was something related to plants but didn't know what. Since when are you so interested in Herbology? Enough to build a bloody greenhouse to yourself. Or that you require the help of Neville?"

Ron had the decency to check the volume of his voice and keep it low, but Harry heard it clearly. Not Ron's voice, but the green monster of envy behind it. Harry did his best until now to avoid his research to be discovered, to keep it secret. He really did! But it wasn't enough. As soon as he had something that he could do more than Ron...

"Ron... we need to talk to Malfoy. I need you to stand guard. It's about the Death Eater attack this past summer. After this is done, we'll talk. Alright?"

Ron still looked to be in a mood, but nodded nonetheless. So they went Malfoy hunting in an uncomfortable silence. Harry didn't know

what to tell him yet. Ron was an insufferable jealous git, but it was still his friend. He got over his worst fear when they went to see Aragog to help him. When things get tough, he's there. But the rest of the time...

They cornered Draco as he was going to the bathroom. For once, his lackeys were absent. They went in and locked the door. Draco wasn't blind. He saw them following him in. After Ron finished checking the stalls for any unwanted eavesdroppers, he nodded to Harry and went out without a word. Harry locked behind him, just in case.

"The Weasel seem tense, Potter. Trouble in paradise with your boyfriend?"

"Practiced your snappy lines in the summer, Malfoy? Don't get your hair in a ferret, it's nothing to be worried about," replied Harry.

Draco rolled his eyes before answering.

"You seem to have grown a brain during the summer too. A bird brain from what we saw a while ago at breakfast. So? Got pre-digested food directly from your feathered mom when you were a baby? I hope the culture shock wasn't too hard on you in first year."

Draco took what Harry said last year pretty seriously. Not a word about Mudblood, half-breed or his real parents, even if that last one was pretty close to the mark. He seemed to have found a loop-hole in the agreement. He never said he couldn't insult his imaginary parents. He had to give him that, he had a brilliant mind... when time came to insult someone.

"Nice one," stated Harry, without humour. "Enough with the formalities. I wanted to ask you what really happened this summer."

Draco leaned against a faucet.

"Can't say I didn't expect that. But you gave time for the excitement of it all to settle down before asking me. Nice one yourself."

Harry laughed a little as he walked along the cabins.

"Actually, I was just really busy. You should find out why someday, in potions," replied Harry, smiling for himself.

Draco raised an eyebrow.

"Don't tell me you found out the difference between clockwise and counter-clockwise? Congratulation."

"Stop avoiding the subject. What was that attack about? Why then, why there? Does it mean something bigger is coming?" asked Harry without a pause.

"Actually," said Draco, yawning, "I won't hide the fact that someone very close to my side of the family was there. It was...advertisement. Without the Dark Lord, they are self-wallowing in their past glory, the golden era where they could kill anybody they wanted at their leisure. You should have realized, by now, that no one was killed. Not even one killing curse. Simple humiliation, property damage...It was a big party. Dad...father seemed to be so...giddy...about it. Even if it's completely illogical. It's supposed to be a demonstration against, pardon me the expressions, "muggles, half-breed and mudbloods". But they didn't make any distinction between them and the other pureblood in their rampaging. Idiots."

Harry saw changes surface in Draco. While he was still a pureblood git, he was logical about it. He was thinking more. Harry kept that to himself. Part of it was because he could not imagine a world where he could get along that greasy blond head.

"You are right. And then they flew away. Right before the ministry official got there. They have someone inside the ministry?" more stated than asked Harry, hands in his back.

"You really begin to use that thing between your ears. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Not this time at least. The Dark Mark, it was. Father came back home shaking. He checked some artefacts around the house and spent half an hour checking and casting spells on his own mark. He said it itched... but how is it surprising after poking it

non-stop? It prickled, he said...But it may be a bad sign for you, Potter. That means he must still be out there, somewhere. He's going to get back and you're going to...be his next target."

Harry nodded, taking it all in stride. It was exactly what Dumbledore hinted in his two first years. What Hagrid told him the first time he asked for the dark Lord's name. Voldemort was not dead, nor was he alive. He would find a way to come back. Soon. How could he prepare for such a thing? He realized he could not really prepare himself for that. He could only get smarter, more powerful, for the situations to come. He raised his head and looked at Draco in the eyes. That guy was even less reliable than Snape was for Dumbledore, he realized. He had no trust in him. If it was to change, he would have to start preparing the ground now.

"What about you, Draco? Seriously. What do you think of...Him? Of what he did in the last war? His idea, his goal?" asked Harry, dead serious.

Draco lost all pretence of a smile. That was the real guy's face. No façade for a moment. He was...indecisive. Harry was sure of it. The guy was still searching himself to decide which side to take.

"I...think he is right. Don't interrupt me, Potter, or the moment stops here."

Harry nodded. He would listen, that he agreed or not.

"Try to imagine what would happen if we kept only the strongest in our society. It happened before, even in the muggle world. Take the line directly from the founders, from Merlin, Morgan LaFey and all those powerful wizards and witches in history. We could combine those lines to create more powerful, more intelligent wizards! You can't say muggles aren't inferior, we've got something they don't! MAGIC! That fact alone makes us superior. Okay. Killing mud... err... muggle-born and half-... hum... hybrids let say, is kind of extreme. Let them live, okay. But don't teach them magic. They don't want to be servants? Go to the muggle side! Look at the goblins. Look at the centaurs! At giants! Admit it! Your big oaf of a friend isn't the sharpest knife of the lot!"

That puzzled and shocked Harry a little.

"Wait a second right here. You're saying that Hagrid is... what? Half-giant?" Asked Harry, leaning forward."

Draco looked surprised.

"You didn't realize it? Isn't it obvious?"

Harry shook his head.

"I guess...I should have realized. He's the first person I saw of the magical world so I thought...that these kinds of things happen... Never thought about it again later."

Draco laughed bitterly.

"Dream on. It's the basics. When somebody has obvious traits like that, expect exotic origins somewhere down their line. Okay, I'll admit I thought about it last year only, after that deal we made. But it only convinced me of one thing about the Dark Lord's motive. They are true and noble. He's a true pureblood, coming directly from Salazar Slytherin's line."

Harry shook his head.

"I've heard you. Will you hear me? I promise not to insult you or your point of view."

Draco hesitated, but nodded. There was always the possibility to flip him off and get the hell out.

"I guess the chances for a strong wizard to be born of another one are very likely, on a short period. It's like...natural selection. Like animal breeding. Don't look at me like that, you know it's true. At the base it all comes back to that. Don't get me wrong. But realize that there is not enough pureblood to keep this going. You know it. That's why some call you 'inbred'. I'm not insulting you! Stop throwing me that look! Think! I bet you can trace every pureblood lines of Britain

together in a giant family tree! Look at Crabbe and Goyle. Are their fathers any brighter than their sons?"

The face of Draco said all that needed to be.

"Then...By keeping this pureblood line, you keep as much of the potential power then the weaknesses. A perfect being is impossible but if you want to get as close to it as possible, you have to take ALL wizards and let nature select the strength of the ones she decides. That's what I think and what made the world so interesting. Diversity. Look at us. We're physical carbon copy of our fathers. I don't want to be remembered only by, and often mixed with, what my father did. I have enough of Snape for that."

"You are right, Potter...on that last part."

"Thanks. And...sorry to disappoint you but... He is not a pureblood."

"What?" almost barked Draco.

"Yeah. I learned that in the Chamber of Secret in second year."

Draco uncrossed his arms and walked toward him.

"Wait, wait. That story of you in the Chamber of Secret is true?"

Harry nodded.

"And the basilisk?"

Another nod.

"I don't believe you." Said Draco with finality.

"Then let me finish. Down there I learned, from a shadow of Him contained in a diary that possessed a girl during the year, who he was."

"The Weasley girl?" Draco said, remembering. Something passed in his eyes. Harry remembered that it was Lucius Malfoy that put the



diary in the Weasley's books bag. He might have known something about it back then.

"His name, when he was attending Hogwarts, was Tom Marvolo Riddle." Finished Harry.

Draco's brain searched its memory in a flash and he answered almost automatically.

"There is no Ancient and Noble House of the Riddle. I know them all."

"Of course there is not. He was the son of a muggle nobleman whose family discarded his mother, I think. Tom Riddle was the name of his father. He hates that name. So he made his own. His mother was a direct heir of Slytherin. I don't know much else."

"You're lying." Said Draco, unbelieving again.

"Follow me then." Said Harry.

Draco came back to his senses.

"Not now. Classes begin in ten minutes. This evening, after supper, at nine."

"Okay." Agreed Harry. "The girl's bathroom on the second's floor."

"Myrtle's bathroom? Why?" asked Draco, suspicious.

"You'll see. I'm going to show you, instead of just telling you."

Harry went to the door and unlocked it. To his surprise, Hermione was there, arguing with Ron so he let her pass. Harry smiled knowingly at Ron and he let half of one escape his lips.

"Sorry, Hermione. Another day, maybe. We have to go to class now."

That shut her up. But the face she made told him he would spill his guts later. Draco slipped by, unnoticed. On their way to defence class,

to the utter annoyance of Hermione, Harry told Ron, "I haven't forgot what I promised you."

She hated that kind of secret! She wants to know!!!

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They had Defence class and Transfiguration. Harry asked their paranoid teacher Moody what was the best way to bind someone. "Magical rope of course!" So they practiced the spell. Harry told Ron to practice well since they would need it tonight. In the Transfiguration class, Harry asked professor McGonagall about conjured ropes. Can they be used for something more than just bind someone? How long could a conjured rope be? How long does it last? Is it very solid? Had it been at the start of last year, the cat animagus would have been suspicious. However, Harry was a lot more dedicated to his work than before. She answered every question with joy.

The evening finally came. The meeting took place. Hermione insisted to be there since she'd never saw the Chamber before either. Harry rounded on her and told her very quietly his conditions so she realized how serious he was.

"Okay. You can question me, but not constantly. Not a word to Draco and refrain your disdain. I'm trying to build something here. So now, it's your turn to behave."

Hermione scoffed at the idea of her not behaving right but took a step back, unable to match Harry's stare. He'd become very intimidating lately.

"Alright already." She simply said.

That's how they got to the special bathroom, conjuring ropes. Hermione took a loose stone and transfigured it in a simple winch. They got the rope on it. She put a sticking charm on the rope so it would not come off and charmed the wheel to turn on a command word so they could hoist themselves back up. Ron and Harry looked at her, amazed. Where did she get all that? How could she remember it all?!

Draco came in and froze at the sight of Harry's friends.

"Don't worry, Draco. They are just as curious as you. No trap intended." Said Harry.

Hermione, not looking at the Slytherin at all, went behind him and made three different locking charms. A simple 'alohomora' would not open this door anymore. This did nothing to help Draco's confidence. Harry went to the faucet with a snake on it and ordered it to open in Parseltongue. He had a lot of practice in the language over the summer while cleaning the Black Manor. As it did two years ago, the floor opened beneath it, revealing a dark, ancient passage. Without hesitation, Harry dropped a rope down the hole.

"The fall can be quite painful. Trust me. It's better with ropes." Stated Harry. He went in, followed by Ron and Hermione. Draco, feeling stupid all alone, followed them.

The descent was silent. They landed without incident and slipped through the opening made in the fallen rock by Ron so long ago. More like squeezed through in fact. Hermione repaired the tares they made in their clothes on the other side, even those of a sneering Malfoy.

Still, she held her promise. She didn't even let a sigh of irritation at Draco's face when she got close to him. A minute or two of walking with Draco looking everywhere in awe, and they were there. It has been almost two years since the basilisk found its end at the point of a sword handled by Harry. Where they were from, they didn't know but the carcass had its worm. And god did it stink. But it was undeniably there. Harry showed Draco a stain on the floor.

"Basilisk poison. It seeped through the ink of the book." Simply stated Harry.

Ron and Hermione were simply looking around, putting pictures on the crude tale Harry told when he got back. Draco got closer to Harry and whispered.

"You defeated that thing?"

"Yes. Dumbledore's phoenix Fawkes came, blinded him and dropped the Sorting Hat near me. I found Gryffindor's sword in it. I pierced him through the mouth, up to the brain."

"Didn't you get poisoned?"

"I did. Fawkes cried some tears over my open wound. It was strong enough to cure me."

Draco whispered, shaking his head.

"So it's true. You defeated a basilisk."

He turned back toward Harry.

"And the Dark Lord is... a half-blood. So... he wants revenge. On the whole Wizarding world. That's why he killed so much. And he uses the disdain of pureblood toward muggleborn, brewing it into hate and starting a war. A vendetta. So, even if he manages to get rid of all the half-blood, he won't stop there. He'll turn against pureblood. He won't even wait to be finished. Who would oppose him anyway?"

"Guess who?" asked Harry with a placid face.

Draco nodded understandingly.

"Someone who's already a target," Draco stated matter-of-factly.

"Who doesn't have much of a choice you mean," corrected Harry bitterly.

"Alright, alright! I'm in. I'm not sharing your view of the world, Potter. Even if you brought up some interesting points. But if the Dark Lord ever comes back, I'm on your side. His is just... wrong."

Harry smiled. He could finally trust him. He hoped. But they have been open in this talk. He hoped it would hold when push comes to shove. And that Draco was strong willed.

"Don't expect me to be your pal, Potter," said Draco, sneer firmly in place.

"I wouldn't dream of it, ferret hair. It would be a nightmare." Answered Harry.

A hint of a smile broke the sneer, before Draco walked back briskly toward the exit.

"Come on, Golden Boy! I'm outta here. It reeks like muggle's breath!"

Ron and Hermione looked at Malfoy, not believing their ears. How were they suppose not to answer that? Although the insult wasn't directed at them...

"Didn't know you could endure being close enough to one without a bubble head charm to avoid breathing the same air!" replied Harry from behind the carcass of the basilisk.

"Ha!" exclaimed Draco, already far ahead.

The two other Gryffindor looked at Harry, an almost visible question mark on their face.

"We have an ally," said Harry simply. Neither of them noticed the vial full of dark liquid he slipped in his pocket along with his pair of protective dragonhide gloves.

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Ok. Just saying what he took would have insulted the intelligence of so many people I won't bother. Instead, try to guess what's going to be done with it! HAHA!

Author Notes:

Disclaimer: I don't own this scranny, underweighted, abused, near-blind, idiot hero. But here what he could've been like...

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The next few days, Harry saw signs of unrest in Ron. He knew the only solution to get his point across, but it could break as well as make their friendship.

First Malfoy, now Ron mused Harry. I made an ally from an enemy. I hope not to make an enemy from my best friend.

Harry told Ron to come and see him on Saturday morning in his greenhouse. As Harry was making his way there, a backpack full on his shoulder, he heard Ron following him from a distance. For whatever reason he didn't seem to want to make the trip with Harry.

'This does not bode well for a good conversation' mused Harry, his head dropping slightly.

He opened the door as Ron was getting right behind him. He let him go first, waving to the far wall inside the greenhouse where his lab was situated. They were alone. Harry warned Neville that he probably wouldn't like the tone he'd have to use. Neville understood. He knew Ron well too and guessed it could very well end up with fists. But it was a private matter. Harry was thankful for enchanted glass. He asked specially for noiseless glass and fogged one that would hide any precise forms.

"I'm here as requested, Potter. What is it?"

This is not starting well at all... Here we go...

Harry opened two standard wooden box sets of potion herbs. Ron looked in it but only to see vials. All were full of some colourful stuff. Harry fished one glowing of a soft blue.

"What's this?" asked Ron, his curiosity taking the lead.

"Essence of chestnut. I thought it would be brown. It came out at quite a surprise," explained Harry.

"Essence?"

"Yes. I found a way to extract the pure, magical essence of natural stuff into that liquid like substance that I simply call 'essence'. I use it to make potions. I've rid it of all impurities and they makes perfect potions, without having to care for complex manipulations involved in potion making to achieve the same goal. Give that in small quantity to a plant of the same specie, diluted in water, and it will help it grow at an exponential rate. Neville never saw anything like that. He helped me collect samples for my collection of essences. We're preparing ourselves to work on hybrids of plants. All that thanks to my skill in Ancient Runes," explained Harry calmly, always looking at him in the eye.

Harry barely let him digest all of this. He went to a wooden crate in the corner. The same one he received in the Great Hall. He opened a few drawers. Ron came closer, in a daze and looked at their content.

"Those are metals and crystals samples that the goblins sent at my request. I'm preparing to extract the essence of some of them, but it's way harder. Here are the tools I'll use to smelt raw gold I bought into something I need. I'm learning how to from this goblin written book."

Ron's eyes were wide open by now. As was his mouth and neither seemed ready to close anytime soon.

"Neville is still way ahead of me in Herbology, but I'm a long shot from most other people myself. The books I read right now are about advanced uses of Runes. I can write and carve them like nobody does. Something I did last year, one of the pranks, earned me a passing grade, NEWT level, from professor Babbling. We agreed that I would work, in secret, on a project for my Ancient Rune OWL, one year early."

Ron was looking at him with a blank stare. Just looking.

"I'm not exactly rich, Ron. But I have the lifetime savings of my deceased parents at my disposal. I bought those samples, tools and this greenhouse thanks to it. I still have enough to last like this until well after I graduate."

Harry stood in front of Ron, his arms hanging at his side.

"I'm mentioned in books, Ron. I'm the Boy-who-lived. I'm the target of the worst, strongest and kinda undead Dark Lord known in centuries. I'm the best of this year in defence. Those spells just come to me. Last year, professor Lupin said my corporal patronus would make most of the adult's one pale. Sirius said I was already more powerful than him, who was an ace back in his time."

Harry stopped. The reaction he anticipated didn't take long to come.

"WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME ALL OF THIS? Are you bragging? Telling me I'm stupid? Good for nothing? Barely good enough for a side-kick? What? Why? Why do you have it all and me, nothing?"

Ron was panting hard. His face was red and almost in tears.

"Why? Why don't you tell me?" answered Harry calmly. "You know why about as well as I do. Why? I wonder. All I know is that I didn't say a single word about you in all of this. What I just said... is who I am. What I can do. That won't really change with time. That's how I was born. What I worked for. What I can naturally do." Harry sighed. "You are jealous. Hey, don't look at me like that or start yelling in denial. Just think back two minutes ago. "How come you have everything and me nothing?" you said, or something like that? I'm not saying it's unfounded. I have things that you don't. And never will, but you have things I never will, like a father, a mother, a sister and five brothers. You always beat me at chess, no matter how much I put my new 'rune replacing ' trick in my mind to the task, you still beat me. That you're a better keeper at Quidditch. I know, it seems so light in the balance. For what it worth, I'm jealous of your family you know."

Taking a breath to calm down, he continued.



"Now, listen. You're my best friend. When things got tough, scary and deadly, you stuck by my side. That's something I'll never be able to thank you enough for. But the vast majority of the remaining time, you act like a jealous, pouting prat. You have to decide. I won't change. Not for you, Hermione or anyone else. I can't. These things will probably keep happening to me. So decide. You accept me as I am or you decide our friendship isn't worth it."

Ron was calm. He was looking at him, expressionless. He closed his eyes, turned away and left. Harry sat down on a stool and looked at his lab. Nothing came to his mind. It won't be a productive day. He went to the Quidditch pitch, took his broom and attacked the sky. Oh yeah. He forgot to tell him that. He's always going to be faster on a broom than he'll ever be.

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Harry came back at the common room later. He didn't even know where the day went. He flew around a lot, walked a lot...That was pretty much it. He felt spent on a useless day. Not a good feeling. Hermione was looking at a reading Ron with concern. She turned toward Harry, an unasked question on her face. Ron didn't even turn toward him. Harry closed his eyes and took the direction of his dorm, eager to finish this wasted day. He had his feet on the second step when Ron's voice rang out.

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"They say in this book that cars burn something called 'fuel' to move. I never saw a fire move around in the castle. Care to explain this?"

Harry could have laughed and cried in the same time. He simply smiled and seated himself beside Ron.

"That's not half of it mate. I heard that in the earlier day of car engines, they called it 'explosive engines'."

Ron turned toward him, wondering if he was being made fun of.

-----

In the midst of these events, Harry barely recalled the arrival of the two other schools for the Tournament. Of course, now there was an enormous carriage on the grounds inhabited by gorgeous French witches, and a wrecked looking ship in the lake where the Bulgarians lived. The foreign students were often seen walking around in the corridors, looking everywhere while talking in a foreign language. It was strange and unusual but with all that happened in his life lately, and all the time he spent in secluded greenhouse on his experiments, Harry saw those events like a distracted spectator. Sure, the Goblet of Fire was an interesting artefact and the runes written on it attracted him like a moth to flames. But it stopped there.

Until Halloween.

Ron and he looked at the twin trying to get their name in the cup the day prior Halloween and had a good laugh. They didn't have a favourite for Hogwarts Champion position but guessed it couldn't harm to cheer for Cedric Diggory. He looked like a good bloke. Harry and Ron were sitting lazily on the stairs the next day to watch the cup choose the champions. The cup began spitting name written on half-burned pieces of paper. Unsurprisingly, Victor Krum's name got out, as did one Fleur Delacour. Really. They were put in the spotlight from the start so much, it's a wonder why they bothered to bring anyone else. Then, Cedric Diggory's name came out. They bet on the right horse! They cheered for Hogwart's champion like the rest of the school. Poor foreigners. They were so outnumbered!

As the Headmaster began his prep speech, Harry turned back to his goblin book. He wondered what would happen if he was to smelt his tool under a full moon? Good or bad? He might have to send an owl to the goblins. A chill passed along his spine. His scar didn't hurt, but he was having cold sweats and dred deep down in his gut...and the silence in the Great Hall didn't help any. He looked up to lock gaze with Albus Dumbledore.

"Harry....Potter."

He held a piece of half-burned parchment in his hands. Harry shook his head in denial.

"No...no. It can't be....no..."

"Harry POTTER!!" repeated Dumbledore loudly, almost angrily.

Harry sprung up, closed his book and went toward the Headmaster who pointed a door. Harry simply went where he was told, still in denial. He opened and closed the door behind him. The three other champions were looking at him with curiosity. The French witch began talking in a pompous way.

"Are you here to..."

But Harry snapped. He took a candleholder and smashed it in a tall mirror, shattering it in pieces. He was screaming his head off. He lifted a small sofa over his head and threw it into a cabinet, making the wood explode. The other champions fearfully stood away from the raging teen.

Dumbledore and the other official entered the room, taking in the damages in the once pristine trophy room.

"Harry?" asked Dumbledore, wary.

"WHY?" screamed Harry, twirling toward him, tears streaming down his face. "WHY CAN'T I have just one year?" he said, his voice finally cracking, out of strength. "Just...one normal year? Okay? Without anything...strange...deadly or...just...weird...happening to me?" he asked pleading.

Madam Maxim was about to talk but her favourite student beat her to it.

"Really! Why all the fuss and crying! People are practically fighting to get in this tournament! Even if you should not participate, since it's not fair, you should be honoured!"

Harry's reaction was not what anyone anticipated. Maybe they should have.

"SEE! SEE!! Listen to the princess there! I should NOT be here! I'm not worthy, okay? I'm too young, without any real life experience and weak. Okay? It's just one big mistake."

"It's no mistake, son," said a grumpy Mad-Eye from behind Karkaroff, pushing him out of his way harshly.

"Someone wants you in this tournament," the teacher spookily kept on. "Someone who want to see you hurt...or worse. Only a strong confondus charm could convince a relic that old that there is a fourth school in the Tournament and registering you as it's only student."

"You seem awfully knowledgeable about how he got in," purred Karkaroff.

Maugrey rounded on him instantly.

"Knowing the ways of the dark scums is part of my line of work isn't it, professor Karkaroff?" he said, limping on his wooden leg toward the increasingly uncomfortable Bulgarian.

"ENOUGH!" billowed Dumbledore. "This isn't getting us anywhere. I think we clearly established now that Mr. Potter here didn't enter his name on his free will. What about the rules, Mr. Crouch?"

The man closed his eyes, deep in thoughts, and opened them again.

"There is no escape. His name got out of the Cup. He's magically bound to this contract. He must participate. The Cup doesn't care for age. She never did. He would not be the first underage wizard to compete," said Barty Crouch.

Harry closed his fists, feeling the need to shout once again. Mr. Bagman, seeing nothing else to add, explained hastily, and way too happily, that the First Task would be a surprise to test their quick wits and courage. He told them of the date and left them with a 'good luck'. Harry looked at him angrily as the organizer turned back and walked

away, almost bouncing. This was a freaking game to that guy! He simply saw entertainment and waited for the 'little titbits' to be solved by others until he could have his fun. He didn't care for the participants. Harry left the room almost running, not waiting for any comforting words from Dumbledore, who seemed so ready to accuse him of cheating when he still had this piece of paper in hand. He didn't care. Because he knew. He felt it in his bones. It was barely the beginning. It would get worse, as it always does. Once in the common room, only Ron was still there, waiting for him. It was already quite late. Ron's head was bowed down. Harry could not see his eyes, but he knew what was coming.

"Say it. Go on, say it, Ron. I'm expecting it."

"How could you, Harry? Don't you have enough? You really want more? When will you stop? Do you really think yourself so high and mighty? You didn't even share that you found a way to put your name in the cup!"

Harry didn't even try. He didn't feel like it.

"Guess that really was to brag, all that crap in the greenhouse. Forget it, Harry. I can't put up with you anymore."

He left Harry alone in the common room. Harry felt so very empty, he didn't know what to do or to think. He realized he still had his goblin book in hand. His fingerprints were practically dented in it now. Harry went upstairs and placed it back in his trunk. He discarded his clothes, put on his sleeping wear and laid down on his bed. To make it worse, he had a nightmare that night about Voldemort. Pffff. Figures.

-----

Angry stares followed him around all day, every days now. Ron wasn't angry with him. He simply ignored him. Treating him like a stranger. Hermione began rounding on him the day after, seeing how he behaved but he lifted one finger, shutting her up.

"Hermione. You're still my friend. I don't want to loose you. But I swear to god, don't talk about him to me ever again. Just don't. I'm

not telling you not to talk to him. But I don't want to hear another word about this. Don't test me. It's your last chance."

Hermione had never seen him so...cold, angry ever before. Not for the whole time she'd known him. Ron was always like a tropical storm. A lot of loud strikes, lot of hot wind until it calmed down and left wreckages behind. Then you start building up again. Not this time. It was a frosted anger, leaving this friendship buried, frozen in ice, never to see the light of the sun ever again. She nodded and stood at his side, apologetically looking at Harry from afar. Harry nodded to her, understanding. They would talk.

Later.

Harry went to the greenhouse, figuring some gardening or brewing of essence could take his mind off of things, until he figured what to do now. Neville was there, busy, taking care of one of their mutual project talking to...Luna?

"At long last, you came here, Harry Potter!" she said, in her dreamingly exasperated way. Neville seemed to sigh from relief, turning his back to them. His work seemed to lead him further and further away from him and the strange girl. Harry smiled. The shy boy wasn't nearly prepared enough to face someone like her.

"Hey Luna. Good to see a friendly face. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Harry Potter! I..."

"Harry."

"What?" Luna said, being the one lost for once.

"You're my friend, aren't you? My friends call me Harry. Most people who dislike me call me Potter. You're doing both. So what it'll be?"

"I understand...Harry. I wanted to ask you about your rune project! Professor Babbling told me you'd make one for your OWL but that you probably won't now because of the Tournament! I wanted to enlist with you as soon as he told me! It seems I'm not lucky since I

only learn of it when you're about to give it up. Could you still do it, Harry?"

The project! Dammit! She was right! Unfortunately, so was Professor Babbling. He would not have the time to do both. He figured he would have to train in preparation for the tasks.

"I guess he was right, Luna," sighed Harry. "I can't be at two places at the same time."

"I can help with that."

Harry turned toward the greenhouse entrance and saw a serious looking Hermione. She walked to him, all business.

"I went to see professor Dumbledore. He knows as much as I how busy you are and how unfair it would be to make you abandon your work for something you didn't even sign up for. That's why I convinced him to lend you something that will allow you to train."

"What is it?" Harry asked, truly curious now.

"Time," simply answered Hermione, smiling. She gave him a small hourglass tied to a long golden chain.

"Time?" repeated Harry, confused. He didn't have 'time' to ask for an explanation before he heard a squeal of delight beside him.

'Wait, did Luna just squeal?' Harry mused.

She began speaking in an exited voice. Dreamingly exited, of course.

"Harry! It's a time turner! You just have to turn the hourglass once to go one hour into the past! That's so convenient! You'll have the time to do your project and your training. The same time!"

Hermione took it from there.

"I told the Headmaster that it was unfair for the other champions to have so many years of practice ahead of you. They should at least give you a few more week times, if not to win, at least to get out of it unhurt."

Harry knew she though alive more than unhurt but could not help to hug her.

"Thanks Hermione. That means a lot to me. I'll need you for practicing and researching spells. I can count on you, right?"

"Of course you can!" she said, her face red from Harry still hugging her.

"Ahem! Don't forget me, Harry. We're friends too, after all!" said Luna, patronizing.

"And... me... me too... I... I wanna help. If I can..." said Neville, shy of interrupting.

Harry's eyes got hard but his crooked smile indicated his mood.

"With all of you guys, those champions are in for the challenge of their life. Boy-who-lived or not, this Potter won't go down that easily!"

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Time sure seem to fly by when you're having fun! though Harry sardonically.

Harry remembered Hermione the previous year. The use of a time turner can really mess up your system. He felt the lack of sleep quite bad at first. That's why he decided to use it as little as he had too. He had to be in shape for the tasks, after all.

Hermione and Luna were life savers. Theses two searched for useful spells and charms that would be useful in any situations. Not only combat related ones. Of course, those did take a lot of space in the growing list of things to learn. With the transfiguration teacher's permission, they took an empty classroom to practice. Harry soon



found out it was easier to hold a shield against the spread hit of a ghoul than the pin-pointed assault of a spell. He found that out the first time a jelly-leg jinx passed through one. 'Note to self: learn a cushioning charm for the practice room's floor.' He made good progresses, but the girls said they would practice as long as he couldn't block at least two spells at once. Slave drivers. Neville had trouble attacking him, so rather he focused his time helping on the non combat spells.

It was pretty much the best Harry could do, unknowing of what the first task was. He kept himself busy not to think about it. His rune project was his main distraction. When you almost pull your hairs out because you can't find a good enough subject and that the deadline is coming fast, it kinda help to distract you. Surprisingly, the answer came from a Weasley.

Harry was sitting in one of his lone brainstorming session in the common room, near the fire. He had his head in his hands and looked at the flames dancing, his mind blank. So was the sheet of paper on his knees. He needed something to trigger an idea. Anything.

"A knut for your though," Ginny said, sitting casually in a nearby sofa. Harry looked briefly at her before turning back to the flames.

"Careful, Ginny. I wouldn't want my inflated ego and quest for fame to rub on you. I keep it all to myself after all!"

"Ron's a git. I believe you, and probably, he does too. When he gets his head out of his ass, maybe he'll found a brain out of here and use it for something else other than Quidditch."

Harry laughed quietly at her choice of word. Quite the picture.

"Maybe he'll evolve then, like in those Japanese cartoons on TV," Harry said, remembering some funny show his dumb cousin listened on the Saturday morning.

"A Tivi? One of those moving pictures box? Ron is often talking about that when he get his nose out of his muggle books. That and secret organisations."

Harry smiled sadly, thinking of his lost friend. He took a notebook and drew a little picture in the corner of each page facing him. Ginny looked at him, curious. After a while, he positioned the book toward Ginny and flipped the pages in a way to show only the corners he drew on in quick succession. A little stickman walked two pace and fell face first, as if he fell out of the notebook.

"How did you do that! You haven't used any spell to animate this!" said Ginny, amazed.

Harry remembered the time where he learned that trick himself, way back in elementary school.

"That's simple, really. When you replace an image by an other similar very quickly, the brain connect the dots himself between the two and translate it in a movement. Put many images one after the others and you have one fluid, moving image. That's the basic of how muggle code images and send them in the TV. It sends so many images in one second you don't notice them individually, or something like that."

"Wow. A Tivi must be really expensive," she said wondering.

"Tee Vee" he said somewhat absentmindedly. "Kinda, but it's common. The great majority of muggles home in Britain have at least one," replied Harry to an unbelieving redhead.

"Why have more than one? It's the same thing!" she said, confused.

"Not quite. You can tell the TV to change what we call channels. It's like... telling it where to get the images from, where to look. From a specific location, of course. You can't have images in real-time from somewhere where there's no machine to get the picture from."

Ginny was shaking her head slowly.

"This Tivi thing is quite hard to figure out."

She got up and gave Harry a nudge on the shoulder.

"Don't give up, Harry. I'm sure the muggle world will give you an idea to solve the Tasks in a way nobody else could have thought! That would show them!"

Has she went back to her friends of her year, Harry was flipping back the drawing from his notebook. Again, and again. Nobody was around to see the smile reach his lips.

-----

Harry presented his idea to Professor Babbling and he eagerly agreed. Luna would be part of the project. While she had to draw a full Quadrant Case to make a rune and still had to search through her books to figure out the right alignment to make the desired effect, she had the most developed sense of unorthodox use of runes he'd ever seen. The way she placed them gave him headache sometimes. But then he'd looked closer, and start to laugh and integrate the pattern in his own work. Luna was very good in theory. Her unique way of thinking made sure of it.

That's why Harry would take care of the imagery side of the project since he already knew where to begin. On top of it, it would take an insane amount of runes. Luna casually said she would not be out of Hogwarts after her seventh year if she had to do them alone. She would take care of the sound part, where he had no idea where to begin at, since microphones didn't exist in the Wizarding world. Some kind of phonograph recorder, even the smaller version, would be unreliable on the field. So, the research began anew.

They were often seen, at breakfast or in the library, in a sea of symbols drawn on pieces of paper, reference books sprawled around. Some students expected them to teleport to another dimension by accident with the sheer number of runes around them. Hermione simply gave up on following them. She had her own work to figure out. Rather, she reminded Harry that he had other classes than Runes and Defence to study. Harry agreed, but admitted he would still use most of his time studying the skills that would be the most likely to

help him survive the year. He could study more seriously later, of course. What can you reply to that?

Harry and Hermione got closer, even with the insane amount of work. In a way, Harry figured out, later, that it wasn't that surprising to get closer to Hermione by working like an ant. It clearly showed, one evening, in the common room, when Harry wasn't there. Ron was studying. Muggle studies, of course. It seemed to be the only class he made efforts without being prompted to.

"Hey, Hermione. Do you know the difference between plane motors and car one's that allow them to fly?" he asked out of the blue.

"Why don't you search for yourself, Ronald? It's not like you hate the subject," Hermione said, distracted by a potion essay she was writing.

"Yeah, but I bet you already know about it."

"You knew what you got yourself into when you subscribed for the course. Deal with it."

"I know, but back then I had Har..."

"DON'T...say his name." she said loudly, drawing attention.

That shut him up good. Was she angry with Harry too? It made him feel guiltily good. Hermione quickly clarified.

"You asked me not to say his name. The same goes for you. I don't want you to soil his name with your jealous mouth. If you ever take me for a substitute of Harry again, you can as well forget talking to me ever again."

She got up under the stares of many in the common room.

"Oh, and don't try me. That's your only chance," she added before departing.

Just like that, Ron found himself alone. He felt his only chance already passed and that he lost his last best friend. For some reason, he felt an ache that wasn't present when it happened with Harry.

-----

That evening, when she got to the classroom they used to practice combat spells with Harry, she was still wiping tears. Her eyes were red and so were her cheeks. She got in, closing the door behind her. She dropped her bag on a desk, searching for the list of things to do. She was breathing by her mouth, trying to take control over herself. Harry and Luna were looking at her, puzzled.

"W-well. Let's see what's on for today," Hermione said between wiping her face and working to keep her tone even. Harry looked at Luna. Luna at Harry. He raised both eyebrows but, she closed her eyes and shook her head. She motioned to the door quietly and the next thing Hermione knew, she was hugged by Luna from behind, the two of them alone in the classroom. It didn't take anything more for her to start crying again.

-----

"He's such a git!" Hermione practically yelled.

After her crying session, which ended on her knees on the floor, they laid against a wall, Hermione using a tissue Luna conjured. An 'HG' initialled, radish shaped satin tissue.

"What did he do?" asked Luna, her attention focussed on her.

"Not much....actually. I guess it's just the fact that he turned his back on Harry at each possible occasion. He's always so jealous and hard-headed! And then, when Harry's not around, he's taking as much of my time as possible, keeping me away from Harry! Dammit! Can you believe this?! To hold such a grudge over such unimportant things!"

Luna was half leaning on Hermione's side, comforting her by the simple contact. There was so much said...and so much left unsaid.

"So, basically, you rounded on him because of the way he acts toward Harry," Luna said softly.

"Yeah... I mean yes. That's pretty much it. I think," she answered, frowning.

"You care a lot for Harry. He worries about you too, you know," Luna kept on, taking Hermione's hand and squeezing it gently. "You should think things through and be honest with your feeling, Hermione. I sense you have stronger feelings than friendship for one of those two boys."

"Which one?!" Hermione asked, confused and curious.

"That...is for you to find out!" said Luna in a sing-song voice.

"You little...!"

Hermione launched a devastating attack of good old manual tickling. She found out that Luna was quite the ticklish one.

-----

Harry wasn't sad to not be there, in a way, but he did wonder what happened to Hermione. His feet lead him nowhere, as his evening was supposed to be spent in preparation for the First Task. Passing a suit of armour, he almost lost a shoe. Looking down, he saw it was unexpectedly... unlaced. Totally slacked. How did it got that way without him noticing? He kneeled down to tie it back.

"Don't look up, Potter. No moves indicating you hear me. When you're finished, get to the grounds and go see your big oaf friend. Make haste! And don't look back behind you!"

Harry, tying his shoe, wondered what Draco was about. For now, they had a deal. So he trusted him. He got up and walked briskly out of the castle, toward Hagrid's hut. His big friend welcomed him in a strange suit, making sign to hurry up.

"Come on, Harry! You're late! Didn't Ron tell you to be here almost half an hour ago?"

Harry shook his head while Hagrid seemed to look around, until he saw that Harry haven't made a move.

"Hurry! Put on your invisibility cloak!"

"I don't have it with me."

"What! Didn't Ron tell you..."

"Ron didn't tell me a effin thing! I learned of this a few minutes ago from... someone else."

Hagrid seemed to dance from a foot to another.

"Hagrid..." said Harry, perfectly calm, "If you need me invisible that bad, tell me how to do a disillusion spell incantation and the wand movement. I'll get behind your hut and practice it."

Hagrid, not having much of a choice, did so.

"Although I never tried it. It doesn't work on... well on me. Quick! Hide! Follow me from a distance!"

And the half-giant pushed him behind two huge pumpkins that survived Halloween.

"Miss Maxime!" almost yelled Hagrid. "You made it just in time! Such elegance!"

Harry didn't move a muscle. It was pretty dark already, but he didn't want to take any chances. Once they turned their back on him and went off in a direction – was it him or did he see some fire for a brief instant far ahead?- he sat down, looking at the two. He remembered what Draco said.

He shrugged and tried the spell. It was harder then it looked, and Harry didn't have the time to practice for hours. Then, Karkaroff came

in sight, checking all around him. A moment before his eyes got on Harry, he tried the spell again, focussing on the feeling his invisibility cloak gave him. As he opened his eyes, he saw Karkaroff's searching glare pass right over him, as he was hurriedly making his way after the huge couple.

Harry got up and took a round about way to get where Hagrid and Madam Maxime had gone. Hopefully, he was far enough from the Durmstrang Headmaster to break in a run. Harry hoped that, whatever this was all about, was good. He wasn't disappointed. As cautious as they though they were, Hagrid and Madam Maxime really stood out. Hopefully, the other Wizard presents had their attention focussed on the content of the clear meadow.

Dragons. Four of them. Damn. He had to prepare facing a Dragon in less than a week time.

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The next day, Harry woke up to take his breakfast to the usual hateful glare of Hogwart's students. His own house wasn't an exception. Of course, Harry had enough on his mind not to care at the moment. Still, it saddened him. He sat next to Hermione who seemed uneasy for some reasons. Probably it was what got her all emotional the day before.

"I'm sorry I didn't stay last evening, 'Mione. You seemed to need a more feminine mind to get your problems off of your chest. Still, if I can do anything to help you, just ask. Youve done so much for me already. I'll never thank you enough for standing by my side without so much as a question all the time."

Hermione blushed, but smiled nonetheless.

"Thanks Harry. It's good to feel appreciated now and then. You seemed to have matured a lot in the span of a year. The exact opposite of a certain someone..." she finished, her face getting sour.

"Ha. A freckled problem it was. What did he do, or probably say, now?"



Hermione simply shook her head.

"As I told Luna yesterday, nothing much actually. I just... maybe... overreacted. It was just... you know...the last straw."

Harry nodded and sighed.

"Well, I know how to take your mind off of this. What do you know about dragons?"

-----

That evening was really busy. Hermione got to their classroom with a huge pile of books, giving at least three to him and the same to Luna to check out. Harry looked at all the books, unfazed, and looked at the titles. He put four of them aside instantly. Hermione looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

"Those are more advanced spell and curses. You know that dragons are more or less immune to magic. I won't be able, in about three day's span, to learn a useful spell powerful enough to take down a dragon. As if such a spell existed. I think it would be well known by now and they would not use a dozen dragon handlers throwing stunning curses at one to take it down."

Hermione looked at the ground, feeling cheated by books.

"But theses might give us a strategy to do something to combine the spell I already know to do something. They want originality. We'll read everything about dragons and brainstorm about anything that might pop into our heads. I need a strategy, a plan."

Neither Harry nor Hermione admit it, but they lacked the best strategist of the Golden Trio right now. Harry though it was just his ongoing luck that the one time Ron would be able to shine, he was upset with him.

So they read. And talked. Luna proposed to change his teeth in marshmallow so big he would not be able to breath fire, and that the

taste of grilled marshmallow in his mouth might distract him long enough. The two other study buddies laughed their head off, but Harry kept that in a far corner of his mind, behind a glass written in case of emergency with a little hammer at his side.

After two hour of this, Hermione dropped the book she was reading in her lap, growling in frustration. Harry smirked. It would not be the last time books would fail giving a ready answer to her problem.

"This is getting us nowhere! No spell can last against a dragon! I know, Harry, the conjunctivitis curse. Sirius told you. But you said yourself it would smell you anyway if you have to get anywhere close to it. And that it would be dangerous to risk such a pin-pointed attack on a moving beast. We both know it won't stop it from raging against you even if you manage to land it. Nothing short than a killing curse from a very powerful wizard can wound one! It's insane... totally insane..."

"There must be a spell, or a combination of spell I know able to handle a dragon! Are we wizard or not?" said Harry, exasperated himself.

Hermione snorted.

"But of course! Why didn't you say so before?! Just throw a full body-bind at him! Oops! It would rebound and transform you in a nice Boy-who-lived sausage right for the four o'clock of the dragon! That should end the First Task!"

She sighed loudly, feeling better letting out some steam. Then she looked back at Harry, already a bit shameful to have rounded on him. He had his head up, looking at nothing. Luna closed her book and stretched.

"Well, I guess you gave him an idea, Hermione. He's off in his own world again. Let's wait till he come back to see if we can be of any help," she said, sipping a bottle of water without a care in the world.

What's he up to? Send ten virtual bucks to my virtual bank account to know!

Author Note: I would like to thanks every single one of my readers that read this work for the story in itself and not to pose judgment on the grammar. Thanks you all.

Disclaimer: I do not own the fictional character J.K Rowling that hide the very real existence of one Harry Potter. Nice try Mister Potter, nice try...

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The day of the task came fast. The champions reunited in a tent, waiting for the crowd to gather and the... preparations...for the task to be ready. Harry looked at Cedric. Cedric looked back and nodded.

Harry, right after the breakfast at which he announced the content of the first task to Hermione, managed to get through the wall of Cedric's supporters and ask for a private word. When a particularly zealous fan stepped between the two of them, barring the way, arms crossed, Harry simply pushed him out of the way. The Hufflepuff was about to get back at him, fist closed, but found a wand right between his eyes, resting on his forehead. Nobody saw Harry draw. Even Cedric gulped as he saw the potential danger in one of his adversary. He hoped duel would not be part of the task. One moment Harry was walking, the next he had someone at wand point.

"Know your place. This is a champion's matter," said Harry coldly. If he was to be forced to be one, as well act as one. Funny how nobody dared question him.

Harry turned away and Cedric followed him.

"This was unnecessary Harry," Cedric told him, shaking his head. "You'll not make more friends acting like that."

"I guess you're right, Cedric. I'm not good at that. I'm a Gryffindor. I'm more in the saving people business. That's what I've been told anyway. In the eyes of your friends over there, I'm just a child that stuck his nose into something too big for him. I can't say that I'm indifferent to everything they're saying, it pisses me off big time. But you know what? After this task, they will take us all more seriously

and respect us. Dragons, Cedric. We're facing dragons. One for each of us."

The Hufflepuff hero blanched.

"Dragons? You swear it's true?"

"On my Firebolt."

"Okay...but...why are you telling me this?"

Harry looked at the sky in exasperation.

"Man, you're thick. So you can prepare! The French princess and the Bulgarian grunt know about it too. That leaves only you. Call it me trying to make a friend or its my "hero savingsaving people" thing, I don't care. Fair-play isn't Hufflepuff, Cedric. It's British."

Cedric smiled, chuckling.

"A gentleman, of course. How could I have doubted you. This won't save me from kicking your arse though," said Cedric.

"Then I'll steel my arse so you break your leg on it," answered Harry, grinning.

They shook hands and went each their ways. As Cedric got back to his friends, they heard him mumble, "That Potter...you have to respect the man..."

Harry got back from his reverie as more officials entered the tent, preceded by Rita Skeeter, the annoying journalist. She didn't make a good impression on him at the weighing of the wands. A journalist that wants to be on the front page with more space than the champions themselves lack some professional ethic.

He let his picture be taken silently, but without posing either. Ludo Bagman waited for the rest of the officials to be posed by the photograph to say his piece for the paper to a fawning Rita Skeeter.

At long last, they gathered around, and were instructed that the task would be to face the counterpart of what they would pick out of a bag he handed them. The goal was to get the golden egg. Harry winced. He heard that they were all mothers protecting their eggs. This would not be a piece of cake...but it should help him if she stayed over her nest. He poked his miniature version of a Hungarian Horntail. As he did so, the replica let loose a cute little flame, trying to fry his index. Harry froze, but then smiled. That would be so fun!!!

He took a chair, smiling, and sat, waiting for his name to be called. The French witch huffed at his apparent lack of concern while Cedric just shook his head, knowing Harry not to be a show-off. He had always backed up what he said before. Viktor Krum, on his side, didn't think so and went beside the teen.

"You seem awfully confident, twerp. Any last word you want us to carry out of this tent?"

Harry turned toward him, sizing him.

"You look like a strong wizard. But look can be deceiving. Right now, I look weak, and relaxed. Think about it."

Viktor, not being the fastest spell to leave the wand, had to think a while before realizing all that was implied. His face showed a grimace, but then it was his turn to go. Fleur chuckled, having heard everything.

"Quite the sharp mind you have, Mr. Potter. It was very entertaining to see this brute having to dust off his brain before using it."

Soon after, she was called. The waiting was killing him! He knew how he had to do this, but doing it was another thing. Cedric was called soon after. Finally, it was his turn. He left the tent, shaking. He could not help but wince, as he heard a lot more booing than cheering. He wondered if Sirius was throwing hexes left and right in the crowd to teach them how to be a good sport... As he saw the nest of eggs, a few stride in front of him, his golden prize sitting on top of it, all thoughts of the crowd zoned out.

Seeing the egg so close...the equation formed in his head and he instantly ducked behind a rock. At the same time, the biggest and nastiest of the dragon he saw a few days ago landed right in front of where he had been a moment ago, preparing to unleash hellfire. Seeing nobody, it stopped and looked around.

Harry, panting behind his rock, tried to get his heart rate under the level that would be more appropriate on the rpm of a racing car. He knew it was a matter of seconds before the beast trailed his scent and hear his laboured breath. From the tip of his wand, Harry expertly carved a long set of runes with a Rune Carver spell on the boulder he was leaning on. He activated them all and they started to glow lightly. That being done, he took the miniature version of the dragon searching for him not even thirty feet behind that rock and cast a spell multiple times on it.

"Engorgio!"

The small dragon began to grow...and grow...and grow again. Harry cast the spell until it would have been too dangerous to do so. It was half the size of the real one already and wasn't hidden by his hideout anymore. The real beast looked at the fake and roared. The doll, being a fake with a limited set of instructions, charged him, lacking any kind of instinct of preservation. Harry, just for the fun of it, sent a strong banisher in its back to give him more speed, sending it crashing in his enemy.

Harry cast a disillusion spell on himself and ran behind another rock, far enough from the first. He carved more runes on it and activated them. He started his dead run again, hearing the two beasts fighting and throwing fire at each other. As he got behind another boulder, he threw a look just before slipping behind it, having run a half-circle around the nest. He wished he hadn't. It was just a doll after all. Its fire was weak and its claws, fake. It was ripped apart. And now the Hungarian was searching for him. Who said dragons were stupid? He slipped on a loose pebble but didn't take the time to curse his footing as he finished drawing the last rune. He ignored the roar of the beast who finally found him, or the sound it made, coming his way. He activated the last set as he felt a rush of heat come his way. Then, he trusted his arm forward, not aiming at anything particular.

The heat shifted upward and an outraged roar told him his plan worked. Arms still held in front of him, he got out of his hiding spot, letting the disillusion spell wear off. The dragon was totally bound in spread eagle style. Two blue beams of magical energy came from the rock he was hiding behind, restraining its right front and hinder leg. The first rock he carved in restrained his left front and hinder leg. The second one he carved had a single, stronger beam pulling its neck backward, pointing the dragon's head toward the sky. The dragon mother was thrashing against her binds, but they were too strong to be broken.

Harry remembered he was timed and ran to the nest, so close behind the beast he could have touched it. He jumped over the blindly trashing tail and took the golden egg as fast as he could. The noise from the exited crowd hit him back as he got aware of the surrounding sounds.

But something happened. Something that none would ever forget. The magical binding didn't break. No. The beast let out a roar. Such an angry cry targeting the world and beyond that it could be heard for hundred of miles around. A roar that effortlessly drown the cheers of the tiny human's in the crowd. Harry, being the closest human present, nearly jumped out of his skin. He even dropped the egg that harmlessly landed on the ground.

After the initial surprise, Harry was angry. As if the beast managed to hit him by surprise from behind. He was pissed at the dragon for making him jump like that. He slowly walked toward it. Straight in front of it.

Harry pushed back his arm in front of him, taking back the control of the magical binding. He forced the beams down, pulling the beast on the ground, on its four legs. It allowed the two of them to be face to face, practically at the same eye level. The magical leash on its neck wasn't a loose rope, it directed the dragon exactly where to look. The beast saw the opportunity and prepared to unleash a breath that would melt Harry at point blank range.

The runes were not designed for such a use, but Harry simply twisted his right hand, fist close, arm bending a little. The bind on the neck of the dragon crawled at a snake's strike speed, tying the mouth close. No fire would come out. Harry, under the unbelieving eyes of the now silent crowd, got in front of the massive head and looked straight in its yellow eyes, going so far as to lean over the bound snout.

The beast growled and clawed the ground, trying to get that insolent bag of flesh. If Harry was intimidated, his posture didn't show even a hint of it. Or his face. Or his own burning green eyes. Instead, he pulled his fist further toward his side, elbow bent. The bind got tighter, and tighter, Harry never breaking eye contact, never blinking. Until...

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Fleur got out of the medic tent. Her uniform didn't do much to ward her from the dragon's fire. Thankfully, the stupid thing missed her. It was only a grazing hit. She would have to use some ointment. Oh well. It was the boy's turn now, wasn't it? Why was the crowd so silent? She came out of the tent, attracted out by a loud roar than rang just a moment ago. It couldn't be over yet, could it? She looked down and understood the crowd.

The biggest dragon she ever saw was bound on its nest, forced to face a scary looking Harry Potter who seemed to hold him magically with his bare arms. Her heart began to race madly at the maddening power and guts it took to manage such a thing! He was close enough to touch it's snout with his own nose!

And then the noise that nobody ever heard before, and would never forget, rang in the silence.

"YIPEKAÎ!!"

Did the beast just yelp in submission?! It sounded like an oversized dog that'd been kicked by its master! The French witch put a hand over her heart, feeling a strange warmth wash all over her. If she cared, she would have seen a few of her classmate faint in a similar position.



Potter held the pose a few seconds, before letting go. He took his wand and targeted a rock from which the magical bound came. He pulverized it with a blasting curse. The five beams disappeared at once. Still, the dragon stayed sprawled on the ground.

Harry turned his back to it -turned his back???, got his egg and walked away. A dragon handler, not knowing what just happened, went to put chains back on the dragon. Seeing it liked that made him forget just one small detail. They usually do that after stunning it with about twenty stunning curse. The dragon looked at the poor man sideways growling and getting ready to throw some fire breath on the insolent...

But Harry stopped and turned his head slightly sideways to the left, his back still to the dragon. It immediately shut up and sprawled back flat on the ground. Harry, not saying a word, resumed his exit, as the handler slowly backed down with his soiled pants. Fleur was almost panting. What a powerful wizard! What a man!!!

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Harry looked numbly at the score the judges finally got him. A nine from Dumbledore...a ten from Mr. Crouch... a ten from Mrs. Maxime... a six from Karkaroff? Jerk.

Harry didn't wait for the press to catch up with him. He bypassed the tent that held Ms. Pomfrey, giving her a sign that meant he didn't need her this time. She looked even more surprised at this than his prowess with the dragon.

Harry took a big detour to avoid the crowd. It was still early. He went to his greenhouse. He took his raw gold from his reserve, the long-ready mould and the powder for start the fire. Strangely, he felt it was time.

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Five whole hours later, Harry was back in the common room. The manual work calmed his mind and the result was really worth the time spent. The small golden scythe was sharp, elegant, perfectly curved

and the runes carved in it while it was still white hot was his most beautiful work to date. He was impatient to work with it. His calm was broken when he got in the Gryffindor common room. The noise level exploded in cheers as the party was in full swing. Harry slowly made his way to the middle of the room. Banners of him floated everywhere and pictures of him subduing the beast were all around. Denis must have been working overtime. He refused to be hoist on shoulders, instead climbing on a table and holding the golden egg high in one hand. The cheers were deafening.

"A victory for Hogwart! A victory for Gryffindor!" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs.

More cheers, more applauds. Not for long.

"Hey! Fred! George! You were taking the bets, right? How much money did you made betting on me? HOW MUCH MONEY OTHER GRYFFINDORS MADE BETTING ON ME?"

The room went dead silent. Faces fell. Not a single smile subsisted.

"I think I should have been a Hufflepuff after all. At least, those are LOYAL. You, on the other hand, rejected me in the favour of the champion of another house! Even of other schools! I'd rather be alone the rest of the year than having a party with you HYPOCRYTS!! This victory his mine and for the ones who helped me and believed in me. The rest of you are sheep."

Harry jumped off the table and climbed the stairs, people getting out of his way. Everybody was looking down, ashamed. Ron was standing at the top of the stairs. He never had a chance to say a word. Harry spat a single word on his way.

"Traitor."

Ron blanched. Harry went to his bed, got rid of his clothes and pulled the curtain around his bed. His sleep took time to come, but nobody entered the room to disturb his search for rest either.

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The next day was plain weird. Gryffindors were staying out of his way. Strangely, the Hufflepuffs stopped tormenting him. That was to be expected from his speech the earlier evening and the group housing the other champion.

But the Ravenclaws, who were far from being friendly either, and Slytherins who were equal to themselves, stayed out of his hairs too. On the other hands, the girls from Beauxbatons seemed to be extremely clumsy in his presence and often bumped on him or tripped into his path in such a manner he had to catch them so they didn't brake their noses on the floor. Then, they went away, blushing while mumbling an apology. Did they even have classes in the castle?

Another surprise came from Neville who erupted in stuttering apology.

"Why are you apologizing for, Neville?" asked Harry, almost laughing.

"I-I-I could h-have help you more with battle s-spells and..."

Harry clapped his shoulder, chuckling a bit.

"That speech wasn't meant for you. If anything, the part about the ones that helped and believed in me is! I share this victory with you, Hermione and Luna. You supported me. And I still have two tasks ahead. That's plenty more opportunities to help, believe me."

Neville seemed relieved Harry wasn't cross with him. His stuttering died down as they made their way toward the next class.

"Anyway, I think you could ask help from anyone in the castle after what happened yesterday! Hell! Even the girls from Beauxbatons look ready to fight to give you a private lesson!"

Harry laughed at that, feeling great to relax with a friend, talking about girls like any other teenager.

"So, that's what it's all about! Too bad for them. I prefer the girls raised on British grounds! Who would want a half-breed woman after all?" he said with a comically disgusted face.

Neville, laughed openly at the so very pureblood-like jab. The fact that they were both pureblood made it even funnier.

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Harry looked at the time, and it was finally late enough in the evening. After his little stunt, nobody dared approach him much. Except the twins. Those two were always searching for new pranks. They often came to him for stuff they found too technical, in the eventuality it could be solved with a few quick runes. After seeing his exploit of this year and remembering the pranks of last years, they began to think runes were the solutions for everything. When you have a talented Rune Carver at hand to boot...But Harry got their feet back on the ground. He explained, each time, the theory he'd have to go through to get to the desired effects. It ended up with them holding their head in pain after half an hour of explanation. Then they'd interrupted him, voicing their respect for understanding any of this. Of course, in that half an hour he could have designed the rune and carve them in a minute and a half. Still, they had to work and solve problems on their own. If there was something totally impossible for them, he'd see what he could do but they'd never seemed to be ones to abandon any projects until now.

Harry prepared himself to get to the empty classroom he will be occupying...two hours ago. Not to run into himself, he decided to use the time-turner in a corner of the room he'd be using. Luna was waiting...was going to be waiting... for him to get there to work on their rune project. Getting out of his dormitory in the common room, he spotted Hermione who was, unsurprisingly, nose first in a book. She looked up and smiled seeing him arrive. She set her reading down for now, having to talk to her friend. She began walking toward his rune project room with him, not wanting to take up his research time.

"Harry. I know you're doing good on your school work... well, not bad actually, surprisingly well in potion though....and the first task was... not easy but... you got out on top and..."

"Come on, Hermione," said Harry. "You're babbling. What's on your mind?"

"Your rune project. I know it must be fun, even captivating and god know I'd like to be part of it but...don't you think you're overdoing it? You can pass all the exams up until NEWT! Take a break! Neville told me he saw you asleep, leaning on a microscope in the greenhouse this morning!"

"I just forgot to take my morning coffee. It's getting harder to kick-start my brain fast enough in the morning."

"See! You're relying on caffeine now! You aren't, in any ways, forced to do this!"

"Exactly, Hermione. I'm doing this of my own free will. That's a contract I willingly took and, as such, I find it more important than the Tri-Wizard Tournament. If I give it up, it would be like to abandon what I want to do and who I want to be for what others want. Some would say it's a teenager rebellion. Of course they would, I'm not doing what they, adults who knows better, want me to do."

Hermione bit on her lips, once again, no knowing how to answer. She was tempted to say that some adults did know better like professor Dumbledore or McGonagall, but she felt it would come out hollow and childish. Then Harry took her by surprise by talking of something totally unrelated.

"Too bad I crashed Gryffindor party after the dragon task though. I really could have enjoyed a few cheers..." mused Harry out loud.

Hermione rolled her eyes, getting back to her bossy self.

"Really! Can't you be a little patient? The Yule ball isn't that far away."

"Ball?" asked Harry.

Hermione threw her hand in the air in exasperation. Harry knew how much she loved those moments when she told someone something they didn't know.

"Yes, the Ball! You know, like a late supper with big decorations, dressed-up people chatting about how good they look and dancing on high heels for the sole purpose of regretting it the day after! Since it's an event related to the Tournament, you'll kinda have to be there and... Ah! Yes. Open the ballroom dance with the three other champions and their partners. I doubt you learned it in elementary school, Harry, so I doubt you know how to dance. I guess someone will have to teach a dance class this year. I wonder who it'll be?"

Harry processed all that. He was going to have to ask a girl out! And dance in front of everyone? Since the info came from Hermione, he was fairly sure he could not escape this. He wondered if he couldn't ask the Hungarian Horntail to come with him. They once were once after all, in a kind of love-hate relation. For once, the attention would not be focussed on him. He could have asked Cho...but he had seen Cedric hang out with her an awfully lot lately. He was too young before this day to know what to do with a girl. Namely, asking her out. Now his chance passed. He figured it was never meant to be. Not to say he wouldn't be a babbling fish if he ever get stuck in a conversation with her.

"I guess I'll have to invite someone then. Someone who won't put shame on a champion," began Harry, looking up. "Funny how I feel it exclude so many girls in this castle. From what Neville told me, I could ask pretty much any girl from Beauxbatons. Even more than one at the same time!" he pursued with a crooked smile.

Hermione huffed while Harry laughed at her indignation.

"But I think I'll ask a more evident choice," resumed Harry, still looking up.

"You're going to ask Cho?" Hermione asked distracted.

"Nan. That ship passed. I guess. If you're not too busy that night, would you come with me?"

"I guess if I can help you with... what?" she said, catching up.

She stopped walking, looking at him with surprise and... a little bit of fear?

"I asked you... well... to come to the ball with me. If you want to that is. If you fancy someone else it's okay too but... you're the first serious girl to ask in my mind and...as you're always there for me and all..."

"Harry?"

"Yes?"

"You're babbling."

Harry laughed nervously, scratching the back of his head.

"I guess I am."

"Yes."

"Hun?"

"Yes! I'll go to the ball with you!"

Harry smiled widely, but was still very nervous. They resumed walking, an awkward silence having dawned on them. Hopefully, the logical mind of Hermione was never far from the surface.

"At least, I'll be sure you won't embarrass yourself at the dance if I get to practice with you!"

Harry laughed heartily. Always count on Hermione the teacher!

"You know how to ballroom dance?" he asked her.

"No more than you do. We're in for some sore toes!"

They laughed together, the awkward moment gone. Only to be replaced by surprise, and fear. A pit, guts feeling of fear.

In front of them, looking up from a book, stood...Harry Potter. They froze. Hermione was panicked but could not move. The second Harry seemed to realize something and straighten back.

"Right. We met here. I forgot," said that Harry.

"I guess the structure of space and time is holding well," replied the Harry at Hermione's side. "No rift opened and we didn't die. I feel no magical reaction either."

"That's cool then," said second Harry.

"How will be the progresses this evening?" asked first Harry.

"On schedule. Funny, I have an impression of deja-vue."

"Figures," answered first Harry, shrugging.

They high-fived and passed each other. Hermione parted with first Harry, second Harry saying loudly, his back turned: "Hey! I remember a kiss!"

Hermione turned toward him, red in the face.

"No you do not!"

"Damn." Said both Harrys in unison.

Hermione got back with second Harry, since the first one was going to use the time turner anyway. So he was the now Harry. The feeling was weird though. As if this one was a fake. She guessed it was one of the dangers of time travel.

"You okay? Hanging on?" asked Harry.

Hermione nodded, lost in her thought.

"Well... see ya tomorrow! I'm tucking in early," saluted Harry.



Hermione looked up to find they were already back in the Gryffindor common room. She didn't even remember passing the portrait! She felt it would not be the last time she'll forget where she was while hanging out with Harry. Never a dull moment...

-----

The next few days were... eventful. The first event happened in potion. It had been a few months now and Harry was avoiding detection from Snape. He intended to keep it that way as long as he could. It seemed he would get busted before Christmas. Using essence, he brewed all perfect potions until now. He had a decoy of herbs hiding his essences in his box of ingredients he kept mainly close. He always added his ingredients when Snape had his back turned, seemed to have forgot about him while he faked preparing ingredients or concentrated on failing Neville's potion. After each lessons, Snape put more attention on Harry. Each time, watching him go, he guessed the time before was pure luck.

The thing was, all of his potions, once graded, earned a 'O'. It came to his mind that he must have been cheating with the potion itself, giving a sample already made he bought from a seventh's year student. It would not be the first time it happened. He decided to catch him this time.

As usual, he started the class by telling them all how inept they were and told them to follow the instructions written on the board. Harry thought bitterly how nice it must be to earn a living just by being able to write incomplete sentences on a chalkboard. His hate for Snape made him careless that day. Even if he had been paying more attention, would he have caught the small glint of the mirror the potion master used to spy on him? Harry was pouring a few drops of essence of daffodil and, the next thing he knew, Snape had his wrist in a vice grip, pulling the vial to look at it at eye level.

"What do we have here, Potter? Really, what is it? I'm curious! What have you managed to put in your potions to cheat your way out with a higher than dung quality you used to achieve before?" said the greasy teacher, alternating between a sneer and a snarl.

"I will tell you, professor. If you let go of my hand. I'm pretty much sure it's bruised by now," calmly answered Harry, heart pounding hard.

Harry hated Snape with all his guts. That's why he never feared talking back to him. It blinded him against the dangerous dark aura that caused everybody else back down when confronted by him. Snape let Harry's arm go, knowing that the boy had nowhere to hide. He crossed his arms and looked at him with mocked patience. Harry rubbed his wrist, knowing it was time to reveal one of his secrets to the world. He held the vial for everyone to see its content. It had a milk-white colour and oily consistency. It never seemed to damp the inside of the vial.

"This is Essence of Daffodil. It's the physical representation of what make daffodil what it is. It's like a magically concentrated version of the plant, without any of its impurity. No dirt, no germs, no vegetal sickness or effect of a bad growth."

Harry carefully put the vial back in his potion kit. He fished another one.

"Essence of Wolfbane." He put it back again and took another one.

"Essence of Belladonna. This plant being naturally potent, a smaller amount of the plant was needed to make the same quantity of essence than with other plants. This... "

But that's all he managed to say before being interrupted by Snape.

"POTTER! Stop making fun of all of us! Essence of Daffodil? Essence of Belladonna?! Such things doesn't exist! If they would, don't you think I would know? Beside, even for someone as...wealthy... as you would not be able to afford it."

Snape took his breath to unleash more insults, innuendo and finally, would plainly call him a liar and a cheater. But Harry worked hard on those. He would not let this second rate teacher pull him down to his level.

"Of course, professor, you haven't heard of it, I invented it this summer. It took me most of it but my relatives were quite impressed with the result in their garden. You probably heard of the greenhouse that I will donate to Hogwarts, after I finished using it in seventh year? What do you think I've been doing there?"

Harry remotely thought he could take some time to grow a patch of flower with the indication for the tombstone of Severus Snape, but it was not the time to dwell in such thoughts. While the potion master took the time to process what he'd been told, Harry further surprised him by pulling his incomplete potion out of the fire. He emptied it with a cleaning spell Hermione taught him and put water in the clean cauldron from the tip of his wand.

"What are you doing now, Potter," growled Snape.

"Proving my point. See that potion on the blackboard? I'm going to finish it before anyone else here with the sole use of my Essences kit. Nothing else than perfection will come out of it. If I can't manage this, I'll admit to be a show-off, arrogant, attention-seeking prat with illusion of grandeur. I'll admit to cheating since the start of the year. I'll accept any punishments or detentions you'll see fit, for this year and the next. I'll accept to wear a dunce hat in potion classes. Anything. Let me finish this, unperturbed, and we'll see."

Snape smiled. 'I've got Potter now.'

"You heard the Hogwart's champion, class. No intrusion for the great potion master. Let him finish his grand chef d'oeuvre in peace."

Snape's smile scared more than one, it was disturbing even the Slytherins. Harry wasn't even fazed. He spent a lot of attention to the board. Now wasn't the time to be careless. He checked the fire to be sure he would be stable, even if he would not have to change it during the making. He double-checked the order of the ingredients and lined the proper vial before him. He had already calculated how much essence of each he needed. Under fifteen minutes, all the ingredients were in. He put out the fire under his cauldron. He let the result simmer down for three minutes and took a sample in a clear vial. He walked toward the front of the class, whose most of the

student had still to put the last ingredient in their own work. All eyes were on him.

Harry gave the vial to a grinning Snape. He should have realized by now that Harry wasn't one to brag. He looked at the potion and his face fell. He uncorked the vial and smelled it. He cast a charm on it and the vial glowed blue. Panicked, he spread some of it on a special piece of paper he got out of his desk. The potion bubbled on top of it and the edge of the paper turned pink.

"HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE!" he yelled, making everyone jump.

"Nothing else than perfection," Harry stated calmly.

Snape looked up at him slowly. Harry looked back square in his eyes. Not a trace of mirth. No trace of self-indulging. A simple serious rock stare. Harry turned his back to him and walked away. People quickly made the link. He had done the same on the dragon he bested the week prior.

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Rumours spread fast. Harry putting Snape at his place in potions was something just out of legendary. Nobody really liked Snape. But everyone agree that he is in the top three best potion makers in Britain. His standing compared to the retired potion master Slughorn was unclear, but one thing was sure: he was amazed to shock and denial from a potion Harry brewed in less than twenty minutes. That much was known. Many seventh year's girls in potion NEWT came to him with gold for some ingredients. Most of them proposed other...method of payment as he refused. Instead, he turned them toward Neville who he said was the one he get his samples for his most potent essences. He truly hoped his first reaction would be to turn down their gold too since they were all very good looking...

He wasn't looking for this... and he lacked the time to do extra essences he didn't even have in his potion kit. He made the girls remember he still had to use his time to survive the Tournament. His problems were way more serious than NEWT exams.

On top of it, he knew it would be a bad idea to accept any... favours... from other girls while he was still pondering on his own position toward Hermione. He dreaded and looked forward to, at the same time, the Yule Ball after the Second Task.

Another event that happened that week came in the form of the French champion. He had to admit he never saw it coming. He had such a timed schedule it wasn't surprising she found him easily when he was mostly alone. He was working on some metal in the greenhouse. Neville was working on a wolfbane-lemon plant hybrid. Harry thought that inventing a potent Wolfbane potion that tasted like lemonade would be a great gift for Remus Lupin for Christmas. They'd made good progresses so far.

Someone knocked on the door but not to be polite though. It's just that Harry didn't trust anyone right now in the greenhouse apart of Neville. He guessed it wasn't above Snape to come and steal potion ingredients. The place was heavily warded now and the door was coded to open only on Neville and Harry's push. Once passed the door, Harry knew it was the second safest place around, right after the castle.

Harry was in the middle of extracting essence of copper. He had quite enough samples of that ore to afford a few miss and to get the right technique for more precious metals. His little burner was way too weak to extract anything this time. And the only moment possible to do it was when the substance was already changing state. He had to melt it. This was why he was currently carrying it in a rune carved ceramic bowl from the brick oven to his workplace to let it cool down.

Neville went to answer the door, being the less busy of the two and the closer to it. Opening the door, he simply froze. Harry wondered who could transfigure Neville in a statue like that. Did Snape stepped over his pride and came to beg for some essence? Right. He still had to work on that flower bed for Snape. Cactuses doesn't grow that fast.

Harry went to the door, still blocked by the motionless body of Neville. Looking out, he saw a very ticked French witch.

"Fleur! What give me the honour of your presence?" asked a truly surprised Harry. Before giving her the time to answer, he clapped Neville hard on the shoulder, making him jump.

"Neville! Why don't you grab a long stick, as Sirius told me, and go to the Whomping Willow? Grab some branches. I want to see if that thing can be turned into something less blind and violent."

Neville, awaked by Harry's clap, acknowledged and hurried to get started on the botanic task. He slipped by Fleur and went away, almost running.

"Fleur Delacour might enter," announced Harry loud enough. Fleur looked at him questionably but her eyes bugged in understanding as she felt the wards she passed.

"This...looks like some heavy wards," she commented, looking around, amazed at the sheer green all around her. Plants were not that high, neither were the small trees, but they were all either blooming or already in bloom. The flowers were so... fresh and vibrant.

"Have you done all of this, Harry Potter?"

"I guess you can call me Harry. We're in the same rocky boat after all. To answer your question, I created the stuff making this possible but I let most of the handling to Neville Longbottom. Plants are his gift. He's quite the shy guy, but he's loyal to a fault."

"I must revise my opinion of him then. I though he was another drooling fan. But anyone that can make this is a true artist with a very acute sensibility..." she said, looking at some lone flowers that needed individual care.

"It was more shock than charm at this point, I'm afraid. He's not very talented with the fairer sex. You haven't answered my first question Fleur. What gives me the honours?"

Fleur turned toward him. Something seemed to...shift in her as she did so. He detailed her attentively as she slowly made her way toward

him, eyes shyly downcast. The sun was gliding on her like its favourite playground. The plants she brushed seemed to trail on her like a longing caress. The air itself seemed to pick up its pace around her if only to allow the slightest wind to play with her golden hair. She stopped in front of him, her foot touching his, her hand playfully grabbing his loose tie as if to observe the Gryffindor colour in it.

"Harry... I really would like you to invite me to the Yule Ball. I know you're a little young for me, but between champions, it should not matter. Your prowess with the dragon really impressed me and I would like to know more about you. What a perfect occasion than that festive night?"

Harry was floored! Fleur was inviting him? More like asking him to invite her but... why would she... Ah. Yes. Of course. Harry tried to look up at her. In the eyes. The way her chest moved could be quite distracting at this distance. Fleur leaned slightly toward him.

**DANGER!!**

Harry leaned back ever so slightly to avoid her approaching lips. Fleur was no amateur in body language. It was as natural for her than plants for Neville. But something didn't add. How could he even resist? She wasn't one to give up so soon though. The most devastating weapon a woman can launch was all indicated for use.

"You...you don't like me?" she almost stuttered, her eyes getting wet. "Am I not pretty enough?"

Harry got out of this particularly uncomfortable position by closing his eyes and stepping sideway from between her and the table she managed to corner him against. He took two deep breaths. Turning toward her, his eye had this hard edge that intelligent wizards learned to dread and fear with time.

"You took me by surprise with that Veela aura of yours. I know I'm not immune to it, only resistant. To be the lone target of it is a new and interesting experience. I can't say your intentions were evil about it but they certainly were selfish. We all use the tools given to us to reach our goals, don't we?"

Harry started walking around, a finger tapping his lips, as if pondering.

"It's not really stripping a man of all his will...but more like directing it all on lust. Careful there, Fleur. You might find a man, one day, so aroused by your charm that you'll lose control of him."

Fleur was stunned. How could he still resist? She hadn't diminished her aura the slightest yet! All men were like putty in her hands when she focussed her charm on them! It made her angry, but she wanted him even more!

"So?" she asked, brushing off her failure. "You can't deny we would look good together at the Ball. Or would you be...intimidated...walking at my side?"

Harry laughed out loud. That witch was something else! Quite the perseverant kind. It was logical. She would not have been chosen a champion if she had not been.

"Sorry, Fleur. You're a bit late. I already invited a nice girl to the Ball. You'll have to settle for your second choice."

"What? Which girl could compare to me? Be it in beauty, intelligence or social skills, I outclass any of the girls that swarm around you, trying to catch a look from you!"

"Watch it, Fleur," said Harry, his demeanour changing fast. "You just insulted about every girls in this castle, including your own classmates. Including my date. That's not a good way to earn points with me. I suggest you get out before I tell the wards that you are no longer welcome."

Harry never let his eyes off of her. She seemed to want to argue further but figure it would not get her anything good today. She turned back and walked out. Harry sighed.

'Too bad,' Harry thought. 'It would have been fun to grab that bum in public while slow dancing.'



He figured he would have to try it on Hermione instead. At the moment the thought displayed in his mind, his face flushed bright red. Right! As if he would dare!

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Another chapter down. Let's keep them flowing!

Author Note:

I'm floored. Seriously. I updated the double chapter at 1 am. I went to sleep. Woke up late for work. Getting back from it, around 2 PM, I checked out my e-mail inbox. 54 reviews. I answer about 5 or six of them and then go play World of Warcraft. I get back at them. 70 are waiting for me. In less than 24 hours. It took my over four hours to read them all and reply to most. It's insane! Thanks you so much!

If you review unsigned, please leave me an address to write you back! I felt so bad for some who left long review but I couldn't reply! I don't want to start to do it here or it's going to be endless.

To answer the most of you: remember that I like to keep my readers on their toes. The story can change direction without warning. That goes as well for love than for foe. But nothing happen out of the blue. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: JK Rowling, in her castle in England, hear a knock on her door. Strange, she ordered the guards not to be bothered. As she opened the gate, Tigerman, clothes ripped to shred and a dog still hanging from an arm, held a cup to her.

"A Harry Potter for the poor?"

Rowling let the gate close back.

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Days passed and Harry was putting more and more time on his egg. The second task was coming fast and he had to figure what this screeching was all about. He figured it had something to do with water since Krum took the habit to take an early swim in the lake every day. He opened the egg for Hermione and Luna without much luck. It was barely three days before the task that something finally came of one of their brainstorming session.

"Water..." said Harry for the twelfth time.

"A clue... did we tried to play it backward?" asked Hermione.

"Yesterday," answered Luna, putting a finger in an ear to block some of the present screeching. "It was a pain in the ass."

"Luna, language!" said Hermione automatically.

"Water...language..." mused Harry suddenly.

Both witches turned toward him, eyes sparkling.

"Mermaids." They both said with finality.

Harry smiled, closing the egg. The silence was deafening. Harry's voice seemed to ring after the long period of loud noises.

"There are mermaids in the lake. How can we translate their speech?"

"Their must be a spell..." said Hermione, browsing in her books.

"Listen to it underwater. The language is pretty much the same, if more Shakespearian. It's simply distorted out of the water," Luna said distractingly.

"Cool! Who can transfigure us a bowl of water big enough for this?" asked Harry, looking at them intently.

The two witches were so enthusiastic to finally learn what this was all about that they didn't even bother to tell him to do it himself. Once a bowl big enough for the egg and their three heads to be totally covered by water was conjured, they listened to the water folks. Many times.

Out of breath, they laid beside a desk, Hermione vanishing the spilled water and Luna turning the bowl back in the chair that it had been prior.

"So...something dear to me. Basically, I'll have an hour to get it back from the bottom of the lake, where the mermaids will hold it from me.

I wonder what it'll be. My Firebolt? My collection of essences?" Harry said, looking up.

Luna whacked him lightly on the head, smiling.

"Boys..."she said." Always thinking about their toys. Think deeper than that, Harry. It's not necessarily something. It could be someone."

At that, Harry blanched a little.

"Oh god. I'm so sorry having involved you two girls."

He leaned his head in his hands, not realizing his own words. The said two girls, one at each of his sides, were looking at him and at each other, their cheeks quite pink. The casual and evident way he stated it... Luna cuddled against his right side and Hermione did the same on his left. He was her date after all!

"Don't worry, Harry," Luna said. "If ever they were to kidnap us and detain us in the underwater mermaid castle, I'm sure you'll come in your shiny Quidditch robes mounted on an engorged sea horse to save us."

The three of them laughed out loud at the image, even if the two girls could not help but think it would be awfully romantic.

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The next day, Harry was back in his lab, relaxed. He already had essence of gillyweed. He soaked a chewing gum in it, making it absorb as much as it could. As long as he would chew it, it should work. He probably would have to wait a few minutes after spitting it before turning back to normal at the end for the effect to wear off. He was now looking for something to boost his speed. A potion? Rune'd leather bracers? Was he even allowed to? He guessed they would allow some things but this would be overdoing it and not in the spirit of the Tournament. It was more their thing to force an underage boy to participate in a deadly competition.

...

Harry started to work on a leather water belt that would allow him to speak underwater. No way would he go there unable to cast spells! It could be used to hold a knife too. Like the Christmas present of Sirius. Like his new baby scythe. He looked at his greatest runic creation as of yet, resting on a holder in his workshop. He wished he had more time to test it out before taking it on the field. Christmas had been a busy time, with the usual gift of a jumper and fudge from Mrs. Weasley, books from Hermione (since now she knew he would read them if they were about runes) and quite the surprise from Luna. Not that it was unusual or weird or useless. Quite the opposite actually. Something so simple.

Leather. A whole batch of leather of many kinds from many beasts. He could cloth himself twice in leather if he wanted too! Of course, he was far from being a leatherworker, but belts and bracers weren't above his skill. She saw he liked to carve his quick rune work in leather, even if they were for a single use. It's flexible enough to fit most situations. Most students carve in wood, as it's easier to chip, sand and erase the line of the Quadrant case but Harry didn't have that problem so...

Back to the present, Harry wondered to which use he would put his scythe. Of course, he would be able to take samples of pretty much anything with that. The runic work on it makes it virtually indestructible. Not god-like indestructible as nothing truly was. It was heat resistant. It would need several dragon's breaths on it to melt. Same for the cold. He joined theses runes together and made it resistant to temperature shock so that going from heat to cold in a short amount of time wouldn't affect it. It had very little flexibility. From the handle to the tip, he could not bend it more than a millimetre by putting his whole weight on it. There was a 'forever shape keeping' set of runes on it too. It's like a self-sharpening weapon! As long as the runes would stay intact, any dent or possible damage would get restored by itself. The magic circling in it kept the handle at a nice warm body-temperature. He even managed to sharpen the edge further magically. He could probably cut a rock or a metal shield with this.

It was truly a master's work, and he was proud. The problem was: what if he dropped it? What if someone stole it! He didn't carve runes on it for that. He settled for a thin rune'd leather band he would wrap the handle in with some kind of 'return to my hand' command. He didn't have much of a choice but to take the risk. What was the point to make a tool if you're too afraid to lose it to put it to use?!

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The day before the task. Harry worked on his OWL rune project with Luna. That girl was simply amazing! He didn't stop himself from voicing his opinion when she shared the method she would use for the audio part of their project.

"I tried to find a way to fix a gramophone in the palm of my hand that would be strong and stable but I could not activate it due to its size. The length recorded with it was ridiculous too. To design something to code vibrations in the air and translate the result in something the human ear will understand is possible, but not in the time we are allowed. I tried another concept that holds a lot of promise. I will extract sounds from images," Luna explained.

Harry sat down and put his head in his hands. How would she do that?

"It's not that complicated Harry." She resumed in her usual serious but light tone. "If sounds reach our ears, that's because something around us made that sound. Might it be visible or not, I think your device will record it. That means that to every moment corresponds a unique sound possible in time and space composed of speech, ambient sounds, energy related sounds and so on. So, when your device will sample the image, we'll stream it in a set of rune to recreate the only possible audio version of that image at the sampling rate of the pictures."

Harry's head was still in both of Harry's hand. His mouth was hanging open.

"Genius. You're a genius Luna. I'm going to personally beat up anyone saying this is more my project than yours. Unbelievable."

Luna smiled and held her head a little higher, proud.

"It's thank to you, Harry, that I found such interest for runes. Every class holds their...interests... but only runes is truly fun now."

Harry was embarrassed by this admission. He made runes interesting? It was at that moment someone knocked at the door of the previously unused classroom. Before Harry claimed it permanently for his project of course. Harry quickly got up to answer. He opened the door only to find his eyebrows raising high. Now that was an unexpected visitor.

"What do you want...Ron?" asked Harry, not in the mood for word games like calling him 'Ronald' or 'Weasley'.

Ron, on the other hand, took that as a perch toward friendship. He looked at him pleadingly, begging to come in without a word. Harry sighed and held the door open, stepping out of the way, to let him pass. Ron looked at Luna who seemed to be in no mood to move from her wide table from where she was drawing Quadrant Cases like crazy. Harry took his burner, in which the tip of his carving pen was already resting, and moved it carefully to the other side of the room. There, the wall was stripped raw all the way to the stone wall. Runes were carved, in the right corner, from ceiling to floor. From there, it started again, but from the bottom right toward the bottom left in a twisted double line. Harry was already half-way. He wanted to frame the whole wall if the present work was any indication.

"I'm busy, as you know, and can see, Ron. Tomorrow is a rather big day too. Before you start on anything, it better not be upsetting as I need all my concentration to do this. If I'm taking the time to tell you this, if I let you enter, that's because I'm curious to hear what you have to say."

Harry turned back toward his work by melting the stone in a regular rune pattern. He found funny he managed to rune his pen, allowing it to absorb a lot more heat and making stone carving as easy as leather.

Ron didn't take Harry's lack of attention as an offence, for once. Having to say what he had to, he was glad not to face him. He sat down, his eyes at his feet and began to talk.

"I'm a big idiot, Harry. I know. I know you know. And I know that by now, everybody knows too. I've tried to come out of my brothers' shadow and, by doing that...well...I had to...I don't know...develop a pride of some sort. Each time you did something, it was like being beaten by one of my brother all over again. The things I'm good at are so insignificants compared to your gift. Chess...talk about something. I realized it even more after the first task. You were right. I betrayed you by not telling you about the dragons. I was thinking along the lines of 'if he's so great, he'll just order it to move away!'"

Ron laughed bitterly.

"And then you did more. You bounded it. Subdued it. And then it was even worse. I realised something that crushed that pride I tried so hard to build. Look at me, Harry. Please."

Harry had stopped carving quite some time ago. He turned around and Ron was looking straight at his eyes.

"You're better than me, mate. Simply put, you outdo me. In everything. Your potion skills got out of anyone's correction grid. Whatever the way you did it, you did it all on your own. Your runes abilities are unheard of. Your duelling skills were always above mine and that's not going to change with all the training your under right now. You can cast spells that some adults can't. You're able to do this and not brag about this. Even more, you're trying to act as if it wasn't there. You forgave me more time than I like to remember my childish jealousy and tantrums. You never asked Hermione to stop talking to me in all of our rows. What else? I'm sure we can still find some! I'll never be able to reach your level. I still would like to be your pal. I want to stick around and be able to be amazed of what you can do. I'm not of those who can become great. I'll just stay in the shadows, watching your back, making sure nobody try to stab you from behind. Every hero...needs a sidekick," finished Ron nervously.



Harry never, in his craziest dreams, thought Ron could, or would apologize like that. He expected a mumbled apology and the proposition of a chess game when he would find the time. But this! He was moved. And glad. He finally had an answer to an old question now. Yes, Ron was truly a good friend!

"Ron...if what you say is true, that you really mean it, than I'd be the biggest prat in Britain to tell you to sod off. But then I wouldn't be the great wizard you just described, would I?"

Ron laughed loudly a moment before answering, looking way relieved.

"Exactly! Harry Potter must keep his image intact after all! But really, you should design something to tame you hair! How will you ever be taken seriously otherwise?" teased Ron, feeling the ground was safe once again.

"Oh now you can sod off! I'll tame them when you'll lose your bowl cut!"

Luna smiled serenely from where she stood, hearing the two friends trade verbal jabs.

"Boys..."

-----

The day of the Second Task finally dawned. Harry got up early, too excited to stay in bed any longer. He was prepared, ready and just mended back an old friendship. He felt like taking down a whole mermaid colony if need to be! He was surprised to see that Ron wasn't at the breakfast table, since he was not in the dormitories. Same for Hermione. Could she still be asleep on this day? It wasn't like her. He frowned and went to the Ravenclaw table where Luna was having her usual breakfast. He quickly diverted his eyes from her plate. People were used to him sitting at Ravenclaw table by now. The friendship with the Boy-who-lived allowed Luna not to be bothered anymore by childish behaviour. At least, after the First Task. She even made some hypocrite friendships with Ravenclaw girls who wanted to know what kind of girl were Harry's type.

"Hello Luna. Did you see a bushy bookworm or the Golden sidekick anywhere?" asked Harry, sitting down.

Ronald earned himself that nickname the day before and he didn't know if he was to be flattered or pissed. Which was Harry's intention, of course.

"No, Harry. I didn't. It speaks volume now, doesn't it? Now I know I'm not the thing that is dearest to you." she said in a casual voice. Harry was not mislead: he saw the spark of malice in her eye.

"I'm so sorry, Luna. They said cared for the most, not respected the most for their cunning mind, unbeatable originality and promising good looks. They would have taken you otherwise."

Luna hit his arm playfully. Even if less violent, Harry really began to wonder if she wasn't hanging out too much with Hermione.

"You flatterer, Harry. Know that I wear my rune'd butterbeer bottle cap necklace against your charms!" she said, head high.

"Wow. It must be working overtime and radiating a lot of heat since your cheeks are all pink. Well! I'm off!"

He left the table under the somewhat indignant glare of Luna. She shook her head and resumed eating her potatoes, eggs, bacon, syrup and bean goo she craved so much.

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Harry was something to look at. He was in a light swimsuit with writings on the back saying: 'Your hippogryph father is stronger than mine? Wait 'till I tell my dragon mom...' with moving flames under it. He would have to thank the Weasley twins for making it in time. He was tanned too. The spring showed enough of its nose for the lake to have lost all its ice but the time in his sunny greenhouse and working with melting metals in light clothing gave him a nice hue. His flying and past of Quidditch gave him a wired kind of look and, for once, he didn't have to repair a summer of privations before coming back in

shape. People were gawking at his golden small scythe he had at the waist and eyed warily the knife he had attached to the same belt, in a holster. He looked like a battle-ready warrior. His attitude of self-confidence and jumping on his feet to warm himself up helped to maintain that image too.

On his side, Harry was trying hard not to take the gillyweed gum at once and jump in the water right there. He held himself, waited for Mr Crouch to say his robotic speech, repeating what he already knew. Then the canon blew. Early. Again. He dove head first into the water, enduring the shock of cold, almost challenging it to douse his eagerness. He pulled out his gum and shoved it in his mouth, chewing fast on the enhanced candy. He began to swim down even before the effect made itself known. He found his finger morphing fast, as much as his feet. His short breath didn't matter anymore since he had gills now, it was perfect. The feeling was so pure! He swam around, jumped out of water for a triple flip and used the momentum to swim full speed toward the deep end. He figured that if he swam fast enough, nothing would catch up to him.

Some plants tried to grab him, but the grip simply glided on him, not having the time to get a hold. Some fish, scared, swam away from him. After a short while, he passed Fleur, battling strangleweeds. These darks creatures were a pain when in group and the size of the flock after her was dangerous. There was small chance she would make it on her own. Harry modified his course slightly, taking out his wand. One pass, only one to give her a chance to escape and resume the hunt.

As soon as he came in range for spells, he began his quick attack. Disarming charms would only push them back and body bind are partially effective against the snake shaped creatures. Professor Lupin was quite clear in his lessons, last years. Those beasts are malicious, deadly, without a shred of compassion.

Aim to kill.

Blasting curse underwater have a very interesting effect. They rip the target apart from the opposing forces created by the explosion in a dense environment. A few blinding spell and a little special he learned

from the twins: Fanged Bat Volley hex. Harry's spell passed a surprised Fleur. He never stopped to look at the underwater flight of attacking bats and went down. It was up to her now.

The last day before the task, Hermione found an old map of the bottom of the lake. Missing parts were filled in by an emergency communication by firecall to Sirius. He visited the mermaids back in his days. He even tried to hit on one once. She wasn't all that opposed he'd said with a far-away remembering look.

Harry got in sight of the mermaid town, following the sound he knew well enough. The song from the egg. He was surprised by what he found there. He expected people to be held hostage. But the four of them were just tied by an ankle in some magical stasis. Hermione? What was she doing there? He guessed Ron was here for him, but Hermione? Cho was no surprise. And that cute silver haired girl must be related to Fleur. Which leave Hermione to Krum. That was a surprise! He was about to free Hermione when two mermaids, swimming way faster than even he could in his transformed state, threatened him with their tridents, saying something about only taking 'the freckled one'.

He had to think back to remember it since his reflexes took the best of him. He draw his small scythe and slashed the weapons, targeting the shaft to avert them from being pointed on him. Well, that didn't go as planned. Instead, both weapons were cut clean. The mere-people slowly pulled the now blunt end of their weapon in front of their eyes, those being open wide in denial. Harry drew his wand with his free hand. He was suddenly alone in a hundred meter radius.

Harry could not possibly just leave with another's hostage. So he waited. Cedric came first, using a bubble head charm. Fleur was fast behind, having finished off her enemies and going the same path Harry went when he left her. She looked at him blankly and he nodded, understanding her silent thanks as he cut the rope tying her hostage to the bottom of the lake with his scythe. Now Hermione was the last left. She must have been surprised to learn she was Krum's dearest one around! Speaking of the Bulgarian, he should be in a right mind when he saw who's going to be at Harry's arm at the Ball.

Said Bulgarian came fast after, half-human, half-shark. Harry cut Hermione's rope, and presented it to the other champion so he could hoist her up by it. He took the back of Ron's robes and began to pull him up. Even with his lost lead, he surfaced a second before Krum. Gillyweed beats shark! At least, in speed...

Ron began coughing and spat water as soon as they surfaced.

"Come on mate! Be on your best damsel in distress behaviour! There are people watching!" teased Harry. Ron wanted to slap him but Harry pushed him fast toward the wooden platform from underwater. As expected, he would have to wait a little while after spitting the gum for the effect to drop.

Harry waited a few minutes underwater while Dumbledore was conversing with one of the mermaid. If it was any indication of his size, the very deadly looking weapon he had with him and the fact he could speak with Dumbledore out of water, Harry figured it must be their leader. Finally, the effect wore off and he pulled himself out of the water. He went to Ron while Krum was fussing around Hermione quite uselessly. He was rather put out when she went to Harry to see what kept him underwater so long.

Harry noticed that Krum's glare could have frozen the lake back as it had been a few weeks ago. Fleur was staring at him too, but with a strange blank look. Harry wished he could understand the meaning behind that look. He simply smiled at her and sat, content, on a small wooden bench, accepting the towel Mrs. Pomfrey offered him to dry himself and the pepper-up potion to get back more sensation in his frozen shell of a body. She was, once again, surprised he wasn't any more hurt than that with the dragon and jokingly warned him they would take off his nameplate on his allocated bed at the infirmary. Even the potion was a bonus since he was still riding an adrenaline rush. Steam seemed to hover all around him!

Dumbledore cast a sonorous charm to announce the results of the task. Harry was third to finish the task, seconds before the end of allowed time. Krum finished two seconds too late. Harry took an easy first place with the bonus point he earned for his show of bravery at the bottom of the lake, refusing to go before all hostages were safe.

After his show with the dragon and yet again another perfect performance, Karkaroff could not go lower than his 'six'.

Ron shook his head.

"Blimey, Harry. Forget what anyone else says or even about that bloody point count. That was hero material. That's what I told you about last night."

Hermione was looking at him, gaping. She had no ideas those two repaired the bridge of friendship, even if it looked more like building a new one.

"Yeah, well it's so much like you too, Ron! You're not even in the crowd, cheering for me, the very day after we reconcile!" said Harry, clearly amused.

"You're so dead Potter!" yelled Ron, laughing, taking a wet towel and beginning to whip him.

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The following days were sweet. Harry even indulged in some 'off time', simply playing chess or lounging. Right now, nothing seemed to be taking down his feeling of warm, cosy laziness. Sometimes, he simply lay next to the fire in a sofa, letting ideas drift around in his head until sleep took over for a light rest.

He thought about his metal samples. Some he had fully transformed in essences, as he saw no real use for them. Silver was one truly beautiful thing. Its essence looked like bottled moonlight rays. That's how it felt. Any lunar rituals or spell or whatever used with this essence would get really pure, powerful and mysterious. Other metals were harder to describe, but the crystals were simply amazing! It was practically essence in earthy, material form! Extracting essence of it only made their use easier. Quartz makes the most potent magical recipient. It was no surprise to see that rubies had an affinity with fire spells and sapphires with cold ones. The surprise was that the affinity itself, and not some pigment, gave the crystal its colour. And that anybody can see those colours. Does that

mean that every living being were, in some way, magical? That would shut some pureblood mouth. He'd have to publish that theory after he'd gained some notoriety.

The first little dent came the day after, when McGonagall told them about the dance. Seeing Ron trying to ballroom dance with the transfiguration teacher was priceless. That evening, Ron was teased mercilessly by his brothers, one sporting a dumbstruck face and the other a stiff frown, both dancing around, stepping on each other's toes freely.

"Those two idiots..." mumbled Ron. "I'm sorry about Cho, Harry. Too bad she seemed to hook up with Cedric. We're going to have to learn to dance right, for me not to humiliate ourselves and find a date. But who?"

"Err...Well I'm a little ahead of you in that department there, mate," said Harry, hesitant.

"Really? You asked someone out? No girls could say 'no' to our local hero after all! So, who's the lucky one?" teased Ron, mistaking Harry's source discomfort.

"Hermione. She's going to help me practice dancing too. You know, being the champion and all, I'll have to open the dance," he replied to Ron, looking at the twins now dancing tango.

Ron was looking at him speechless, mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.

"Good!" he finally said nervously, a little too loud. "Good..." he repeated, more quietly. "At least, it make one of us...cared. So...you and Hermione, huh? You...going out with her? Is it a first date or..."

"I don't know yet," Harry said, slowly, reading his friend carefully. "It might. She has been there for me and I really could do worst for a girlfriend, y'know? I guess we'll see that at the Ball."

"Great! Great. Good for you. If...Do you think we could...practice dancing all the three of us? Not that I fancy dancing with Hermione or anything or..."

"YES...Ron. It's okay. I'll ask her. I don't think she'll mind too much. But in exchange, could you do me a favour?"

"Of course! What do you need?" answered Ron hastily, eager to be of some help.

"Ask Luna to go with you. Show her a good time and dance with her on the Yule Ball. She stuck by me all year long too and has been a life saver with my rune project and spell research. Don't overdo it, since she'll know. Believe me! She'll know. Just... be nice."

Ron smiled an honest smile, leaning against his chair.

"Hey, that's a rich idea, mate. It solves most of my problem too! We could even invite her to our little dance practice! Seeing her step on Hermione's toes would be something making me wish I had a camera like Collins!"

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They schedule the first dance practice that very weekend. Harry was delighted to see Dobby in the kitchen and asked him to bring some snacks and pop-corn once and then. Sitting and watching two people trying to ballroom dance was just as funny as trying themselves. They got a lot better, even using the stuff lying around in the rune project room as an obstacle course. Then, Ron produced a wizard wireless radio from somewhere and they tried to dance over the music of 'The Two Sickles', 'Lounging zombies' and the group of the moment, 'The Weird Sisters'. A most hilarious moment was spent when Harry and Luna danced in all dignity over the weather report.

As always, every good thing must come to an end, and it came in the form of the potion class they had on Monday morning. Harry was taking good notes on the potion he made, always keeping many doses of each ones for possible uses. He was going to make whoever the vial company was rich. He was already receiving



advertisement from them by owl with discounts and vial storage products. Today though, Snape had something else in mind. As Harry opened his potion kit, Snape was already standing behind him.

"What is this, Potter? No herbs? You can't make a potion in MY class without such. I'm afraid you'll have to leave. As long as you won't be correctly supplied, you're not going to set foot in this class again. Of course, as such, it shall be considered as unattended class and, if you take too long, it will stop you from attending your OWLs. Even if they are next year. What a pity," he finished, grinning.

Harry looked at him, eyes comically bugging out. Not that he was really surprised, he just felt like playing the part.

"But you must be confused, Professor. These are simply ingredients prepared in an alternative method. I read the school curriculum before bringing these in class, I assure you! It is all perfectly allowed! A student has the right, and even encouraged, to grow his own supplies! I know that you're not qualified to evaluate, or understand, this rather exotic way of potion making, but I assure you that I will pass my exams and that I will be allowed to use these to take my OWLs. Even NEWTs, if I fancy Potions worthy of my time."

Snape was seething. Unqualified? Too stupid to understand?

"I should hex you where you stand, insignificant little insect. Instead, I will simply flunk your exams. Oh yes! I can! I have all the liberties to do so and, believe me, the Headmaster can't save you this time," said Snape, his face very close to the one of the Gryffindor Champion.

"You will flunk my final exams and my OWLs?" asked Harry, his face neutral.

"Yes."

"This year?"

"YES!!"

"How much do you bet, dumbass?" asked Harry on an even tone, raising one eyebrow. His posture was a screaming challenge.

The classroom was already quiet. No one dared to even move or breathe too loudly. Seeing any teacher in that state was a frightening sight, let alone Snape. But that last comment had them all cringe with a feeling of dread.

"How...much... do I bet... dumbass?" Snape very slowly repeated.

"Yeah. Put your words in actions for once. How much do you bet? Hey! I know! I bet an exemption of this class until my NEWT exam."

"And, if by some cosmic event, you lose?" said the teacher on a deceiving calm voice.

"Easy. I fail the Tournament on purpose, and resign from Hogwarts. I'll even give you my wand."

Snape had a feverish stare as he uttered: "Deal. You are going down, boy."

Harry smiled and put all his barely unpacked things back in his bag. He shouldered it before saying one last thing.

"Nope. You are. Read the rules of the Tournament, wise guy. I'm exempt of all of the course's exams as a champion, automatically passing them all. That include potion, dumbass."

The potion master's mouth opened slowly, not a single sound finding its way out of it. He stood there, unmoving, as Harry made his way out, chuckling softly.

That said, the students all turned out very good potions on that day. Even Neville. After all, the potion teacher sat in his chair and stared with a blank look at nothing for the rest of the day, musing on how he gave his worst enemy a free pass in potion for the rest of his time at Hogwarts.

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Snape's final battle with Harry became the new gossip of the week. As the defeated potion master learned, Dumbledore could do nothing to reverse this. After all, all potion matters were left to his discretion, as he had demanded when he started teaching there, and he had made a deal.

"Don't worry about young Harry Potter, my boy," said the Headmaster to the irate potion master. "I'm sure he'll do well on his OWLs and NEWTs without your guidance. He found his own way."

That did nothing to calm the greasy teacher.

The Yule Ball came at the speed which important events seem to come. Too fast when you're not ready, dragging on the time frame when you are. Thankfully, Harry was busy, once again with his rune project. He had modifications to do on his old muggle glasses. He asked Luna to replicate them so he could see what he was doing while working on them. They were ugly, with a thick black frame. But that thick frame was exactly what he needed right now. He had to buy a specifically made tool for precision carving. The effing thing cost forty galleons! He would have to sell some potion ingredients soon before the end of his Hogwarts years if he kept spending like that!

He helped Ron too, saying he could not let his 'sidekick' walk around in that horror what some sadist, two centuries ago, might have called a dress robe. Ron would be staining Harry's image after all... He was joking around about it but Ron was embarrassed as hell, but grateful. He accepted it, simply saying that, one of these days, he would return the favour.

They went to Hogsmeade and bought him some dark red dress robes. On his side, Harry liked the green set Ms. Weasley choose for him, but it was a little plain. He was getting a little sick of green too. That was too Slytherin. So, he took that occasion to change his green vest to a golden one with red trim and black buttons. He even got a refund on his green one, since it was untouched. Cost him a few sickles!

Harry hadn't asked Ron how it went to ask Luna at the Ball. The next day he did it, he received a hug in private from Luna.

"Thank you, Harry," she said. "It's very thoughtful of you."

"Does anything escape you?" asked Harry, comically exasperated.

"Was I to think that Ron had the guts and wits to ask me out all by himself?"

"Good point."

Like a performance without practice, the nervous teens prepared themselves to set foot on stage. The great night came and found two nervous Gryffindors to wait for their female best friends to come down the stairs of her dorms. Neville was already ahead with a sparkling Ginny. Receiving a glance from Harry, Ron understood it wasn't the time to play the 'protective brother role'.

"That dress look good on you sis! Have fun!" he simply said, nodding at Neville, who stopped looking away constantly.

"You prat!" answered Ginny, relieved at her brother's reaction. "You did find something nice to wear! You're don't look half bad yourself!"

The playful banter died at the view of Hermione. She was gorgeous! All plans to hook her up with Ron through some complex plan vanished from Harry's mind. She was his date!

"Come on boys! It's nothing you haven't seen day after day before!" said a grinning, but blushing (and perfectly bushy-hair free) Hermione.

"It's not...who we're looking at but how she presented herself," said Harry, barely above a whisper. "You're beautiful enough to be a king's ransom!"

Ron didn't know where to put himself. He simply turned his back, pretending to give them the moment, when, secretly, he was drying his eyes, confused from his own reaction. He collected himself pretty fast. He could not act like a fool. He simply said, half-turned: "I'll let you two lovebirds to yourselves or I'll be late to greet my own date! See ya later!"

He went off as Harry offered his arm to Hermione, escorting her. When they finally got to the Great Hall, the place was unrecognizable, it truly looked like an ice palace. Ron showered Luna with short but heartfelt compliments of how good she looked and that her brand new radish earrings were a welcome change from all the costly jewellery around. Oh yeah, he was doing his very best.

They had fun during lunch, the Headmaster regaling them from random titbits making Harry wonder if he had any Lovegood blood in his veins. The feast was grand, but even the dessert came and passed, the table were pushed back against the walls, simply moving out of sight, leaving the Hall free and showing how vast it really was. Harry took Hermione by the hand and walked with her to the middle of the place. He didn't have to be told it was time. He knew. The other champions followed a split second later with their partners. Quiet music began to slowly fill the place.

"Nervous?" asked Hermione.

"A wreck," Harry told her truthfully. "But I believe in who I'm with."

The dancing began and it was enchanting, so to speak. The champions, all of them, were as impressive on the dance floor then on the battle field. After the first verses, Dumbledore himself showed his experience in the matter, Minerva McGonagall following his lead with equal grace. She wasn't the dance teacher for nothing. Hagrid had an amazing and most surprising grasp of ballroom dancing with Madam Maxime as a partner. Slytherin would have a hard time calling him an uneducated oaf now.

Dancing took a turn for the worst for the older generations later as the Weird sisters replaced the classical orchestra. The young group levelled the dance floor. The most surprising was to see professor Dumbledore get on the dance floor, break dancing and twirling around on his head with his beard flying around. After a good five minutes, professor Dumbledore changed in a laughing George Weasley. The joke was greatly applauded and the real Dumbledore against the side of the room said he never looked so young.

Ron took his promise to heart and danced a lot. He even looked to be enjoying himself after a first few moments of embarrassments. Hermione looked indecisive from time to time, but found her resolve when she saw couples leaving discreetly left and right. The garden outside looked stunning, a fake spring blooming outside for the ones who wanted to take a calm moment from the loud great Hall. She took Harry by the hand and led him outside for a walk. She was leading him further always in the obvious search of...intimacy. As she began to walk a little faster, Harry slowed her down, squeezing her hand.

"Relax, Hermione. It's a beautiful night. Enjoy the moment," he said, smiling.

But Harry himself didn't know how he managed to say that looking so calm. What would he do? What did he want to do? Would he do it or know when to do what he didn't know even what when?! Did that make any sense at all? They finally reached a bench and Harry, like a gentleman he learned to be that very night, gave his vest to Hermione to protect her from the chilly night air.

"Oh Harry! It's as if you know exactly what to do in this situation! It's not fair!" said Hermione, frustrated for once to be the one totally clueless.

Harry chuckled as he sat beside her. The wonders of teenage angst, he thought, amused that he was able to see it and to be affected by it at the same time!

"Would it reassure you to know that I'm about as calm as when I was fighting the dragon?"

"So, I'm an evil fire-breathing monster to your eyes right now, is that it?"

"Of course not! You know what I..."

But he never finished that sentence as he was cut off. Hermione's lips were over his own now and his mind went blank. He could only think...strange thoughts. It wasn't like he thought it would be.

Hermione was the first to pull back, looking down.

"Hum... I'm sorry Harry. I think..." she trailed off.

"Ron, huhn?" stated Harry.

Her fist closed but she nodded.

"Though so. This... was my first kiss too, as I guess it was yours. It was really nice by the way. It's just that... the feeling behind it were not the right ones, I guess."

Hermione smiled and let out a breath. Harry stretched out and reached around Hermione, putting an arm around her shoulder. She looked at him, surprised.

"Hey! We just had a moment! We had a cool party and a kick-ass dance! Let's enjoy the stars a while before going back."

Hermione snuggled against him in search of more heat and sighed, looking at the stars above. She had no trouble saying what she thought at that moment. Harry made things really easy for her.

"We may not be a romantic couple, but I still love you, in a way. You're unique. I'm glad being best friend with you. I'm one lucky girl."

"Thanks. I'm one lucky guy to know you too. Now, all that's left is to use this situation to make another lucky guy."

Hermione slowly looked up at his Machiavellian face. She shivered. That's the face he had when about to play a great prank.

"And you're going to play your role, Hermione Granger," he stated firmly.

Hermione could not help but to laugh. It was finally settling! Everything was good with Harry, her feelings were sorted. And maybe, just maybe, she wouldn't have to hammer a cupid's arrow in Ron's head to make him understand how she felt.

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Ta-da!!! Not a Harry/Hermione! Please, don't cry! Get a hold on yourself! It's going to be okay. Mwouhahahaaaaaaaaaaaaa...Even better than okay...



Author Note: FOUR HOURS!!! It took me four hours in two days to answer most of the reviews I got! Wow! Thanks you all so much for the support! I'm planning on longer chapter past the tenth. Enjoy!

And here's a message from our non-sponsored Proofreader!

Hi everyone, it's ErikArden, Tigerman's Beta. Want to apologize for the delay in Ch 9's release, I got WAY behind due to a busted harddrive(Physically) and family in town and I lost sight of this chapter, but it's up now, so enjoy!

~ErikArden

Disclaimer: Eenny, menny, meany-moe. Pick a Harry or you've got zero. Enny, menny, meanny-moe.... DARN!

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Many couples were still dancing late into the night when Harry took Hermione back to the common room. It had no sense to prolong the night if everything was perfect as it was. Harry relieved his sore neck of the tie and climbed the stairs to his dorm after dropping Hermione at the base of the stairs to the girl's rooms. Ron was already asleep, snoring lightly, even though he had been there less than an hour. In deep sleep, Ron could snore like the Hogwarts Express itself. Not for a long time, hopefully.

Harry was about to slip off from his shoes when he noticed something on his bed. A rose. It was freshly cut and looked awfully like one around his greenhouse. He took it in his hand and groaned. Oh yeah. He recognized very well from the pulling feeling behind his navel what was about to happen.

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Harry stumbled as he landed from the portkey travel, almost staying on his feet. Almost. He rolled on himself and whipped his wand out, letting his eyes adjusting to the darkness. It didn't take too long since the dormitories he was in a moment ago had their lights out. A thin figure stood straight from leaning against the greenhouse he

recognized as his own. At least, he wasn't too far. He finally recognized the form as it grew closer.

Fleur.

Harry stopped aiming at her and put his wand back up his sleeve. He found a nice groove for it in his vest.

"Good evening, Harry Potter," she said in a soft voice. She was still in her clothes from the Ball, pretty much like he was.

"You could say 'Good night' at the hour we're at," said Harry, trying to stay civil. He had been forced to be there after all.

"Could we talk inside?" she asked, not fazed at all.

Harry wasn't sure what this was all about. Was she still mad about his refusal? He opened the door, quietly announcing to the ward the presence of the guest. He held the door open for her and she passed him, a hand holding her arm, not looking at him. As soon as the door was closed, she tackled him against it, kissing him with abandon. Harry was surprised, to say the least, and barely found the wits to answer back to such ministrations. After a few minutes, having her body pressed against his, rubbing it without much shame, she parted for air. Harry was seeing stars but grinned nonetheless.

"Wow. Wicked," he said with great sagacity.

Fleur grinned in turn, with a still very hungry look in her eye.

"I'm not a little girl, Harry. I saw you with Hermione. I followed you with a disillusionment charm. When I saw you kissing her, I was ready to give up. But it was so sweet that I had to watch. Then I heard what happened, Harry. You're more mature than any guy my age I've dated."

At this point she could not keep up without stealing at least a small kiss.

"Maybe I'm a little princess, and you would be right to say that I always get what I want. Right now, I have this urge to have you! I'm so glad you had your first kiss from a cute, nice and innocent girl like Granger! Now, I can show you the rest without any guilt..."

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The next morning was, fortunately, a Saturday. Many didn't wake up in time for breakfast at all. Despite the trouble, the House elves served breakfast all morning long for the late sleepers. Harry hadn't had much sleep. He was up at ten and munching on a piece of toast, eyes lost far, far away, and smiling goofily. You could not miss that one. A few daring Gryffindor asked things like "had a good party, or a good after-party?!" This only had him grinning wider. He wasn't totally gone though, he just couldn't stop smiling. He guessed he could use that to diffuse rumours from spreading to fast, too far. He always gave the same answer, not in the mood to put his mind to work.

"Hermione is a sweet girl, and her kisses are like honey."

That sent'em all laughing and clapping him in the back. For once, they could be friendly with him without any afterthoughts. Since the dragon speech, they would not dare taunt him with lewd comments.

At the Ravenclaw table, many of the French witches were looking at him oddly...hungrily. Harry tried not to care much. When Fleur finally came for breakfast, she looked like the cat that caught the canary, or more precisely a whole flock. Harry only glanced at her. Her classmates were looking at her with envy and... She wouldn't dare! She told her friends about it? They'd better be good at keeping their mouths shut. It would ruin his barely blooming plan for Ron to be jealous if he had to explain how good it is to look at the sunrise, sprawled on your back, with a French witch doing a pretty good impersonation of John Wayne on you while you play the horse. Assuming Ron knew who that was of course. That memory sent him grinning once again. For once, the speed with which the news travelled in the castle played in his favour. Ron seemed to have lost a place for the Chuddley Canon as he sat down.

"Hi. I heard you hooked up with Hermione last night?" he asked, not trying hard to hide his mood.

"Uh-hun. You could say that. It's all very new, I'm glad I made a move. By staying indecisive, I could have lost her to someone else," Harry answered, not looking at him. The message was so obvious even him could not miss it. It seems he caught up pretty fast.

"Like whom?" he asked, suspicious.

"Krum, who else? Don't you remember? She was underwater in the Second task because of him! He even asked her out to be at the Ball with him right after! What a romantic guy. Luckily, I had already asked her by then."

"Yeah, luckily," Ron answered with sincerity. He really seemed to believe it was better for Harry to have won Hermione's affection than Krum. Harry guessed Ron wouldn't be Krum's number one fan anymore.

The girl of Hogwarts' gossip finally arrived, her hair back to it's normal bushy self. Harry smiled at her and she answered by sitting next to him. Quite close. Harry would have chuckled if he could. Hermione was slipping in the play pretty fast.

"It takes an incredible amount of hair gel to get it to look like it did yesterday! It takes forever to wash out too!"

"You don't need it, Hermione. You're perfect like that," said Harry, looking love struck.

Ron jumped on his feet, panicked.

"Hermione! I...I..." he started, not really knowing how to finish this.

'Well,' thought Harry, 'that game was won fast enough.'

"What is it, Ron?" asked Hermione, trying to sound casual. "Say it now as I intend to spend the day with Harry so we can know each other better."

That didn't make sense, really, since they knew each others from first years. But Ron had sirens blaring in his head, despite Hermione terrible declaiming skills. Hopefully for them, Ron was as thick as the castle walls.

"I...don't want you...to go with Harry today. Come with me instead! I... Let's go to Hogsmeade!"

"Why would I do that?" asked Hermione, getting up to face him, already nervous and ready to crack any seconds. Neither one seemed to notice the hall had gone silent to watch them.

"Because...I...I...I-I-I-I."

Harry rolled his eyes and thought that Ron sounded like a broken Mexican record and he'd had enough. He would have to put his foot down. He did so, hard, on Ron's butt, pushing him on Hermione. Their lips met, probably a little painfully, but Hermione kept them locked there for a while, grabbing the back of Ron's head. Many in the Great Hall snickered while others were looking at them in confusion. Wasn't Hermione going out with Harry?

"Finally!" said Harry loudly, throwing his hands up in the air.

Hermione broke the kiss, her cheek as pink as Harry remembered them last evening, in the garden.

"Thanks for the hand, Harry. He would have taken forever!"

Harry brought two thumbs up. Hermione took a confused Ron's hand and pulled him away, to find a private place to explain the situation to him and inform him of his new status as her boyfriend. And to explain what she expected of one.

Harry turned back to the breakfast table and his eyes were quickly attracted by a young French witch's amused face. He winked at her and she rolled her eyes, got up and, to everybody's surprise again, sat next to him. What did happen at that Ball??!!

"So...this was the 'help' you promised Hermione yesterday? Interesting, that foot technique."

"Ron has many flaws. One of them is to always act once it's too late," Harry told her, not at all uncomfortable by her close presence.

"So...you made it look like it was too late so that he admits his feelings? Classical setup."

"Yeah... but he always crashes down when the moment to 'make the step' comes. So I gave him a little push," finished Harry, proud of him.

"Harder than that and you would have broken both their noses," mocked Fleur lightly.

"If that's what it takes for Ron to touch her..."

By now, there were eavesdroppers all around, trying to be as subtle as possible.

'As good a time as any,' thought Fleur.

"I don't remember you needing a push to touch me last night..." she said casually.

Fountains of pumpkin juice erupted at Gryffindor table. Fleur acted as if she'd said nothing special, like she hadn't noticed the reactions. Harry looked at her, amused. He made his decision too.

"Hopefully I didn't need any! I was busy enough trying to handle a wild cat, thanks Merlin for silencing charms..."

New rows of coughing, as the fountain-students didn't have any time to catch their breath back. Harry didn't care much. For once, the gossip about him would be about something good! Fleur seemed to have found what she was looking for. She seemed...contented.

"How about you take your day off to show a foreign witch around, Mr. Potter? I've seen the sights but I bet you could do better than those

guides trying to find the darkest corners to take me to," she said in an innocent tone. By now, Harry knew she was nothing but.

"I guess I can push my work back a little. It's a Hogsmeade week-end. I could make you visit further than Madam Puddifoot's closed boot," Harry said generously.

"That would be nice" answered Fleur, sounding sincere.

Harry spent the day with his new girlfriend. She was always flirting, full of innuendo. Harry found that quite arousing, and distracting, as he new she wasn't all talk. Something bothered him though. He had to voice it on the road to the Shrieking Shack.

"Tell me, Fleur. I wonder how you are with your parents, your sister and your friends. You can't always be like this? Is that... is that how guys expect you to be?" Harry said, trying his best not to sound accusing.

Fleur looked angry at first, but she simply kept her mouth shut a while, frowning. Harry was about to apologize when he got his answer.

"You are too smart for your own good, Mr. Potter. It is indeed how I act with most boys. How can you talk of anything serious when the guy's looking at your chest, his face showing he's thinking about something else entirely. You say something intelligent and they'll think you're trying to sound intelligent. Make a mistake and you're a dumb blonde, just as they thought you were. It was me, yesterday night, make no mistake. And I fully intend to do it again for the length of my stay here! You may not understand the thrill of riding a young, powerful wizard but..."

"If it's anything like being straddled in a lip-lock by a hungry-looking radiant and lustful witch, I think I may have a clue," interrupted Harry, his face quite colourful from the direction the conversation was going. It was still one of the most embarrassing things possible for his fourteen years old brain to think after all. Even despite his experience last night.

Fleur smiled at the compliment. She felt a lot better to be able to talk about things deeper than a cup of cappuccino. And he was listening! Finally!

"Thanks Harry! So...That's pretty much it. I act that way...naturally with that kind of people. I hadn't realized until now. Hopefully, my tests scores and my entry to the Tournament are proof of my accomplishments. They speak for themselves. Maybe, then, people will see more of me than 'a little princess'."

Harry felt guilty about calling her that the first time they were in a room together. Although, she deserved it back then and he wasn't exactly in a right state of mind. He decided not to apologize.

"I rather like to hide what I can do then show it to the world," Harry started, looking further ahead. "But I try not to deny it either when it comes out."

"Yes. I heard that you tricked a teacher for a free ticket all the way to your final exam. He doesn't seem to be the kind to be easily intimidated. Frankly, he freaks me out," she admitted with a shiver.

"It's the grease. Don't worry, it's only contagious to the Slytherin house. Here we are! The Shrieking Shack. The oldest haunted house of Britain. Supposedly"

"Really?" she asked, looking curiously at the run-down building.

"Well, officially it is. I know the true story. It's a tale of loyalty and friendship that happened quite some years ago."

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Harry showed places to Fleur no other boys would have ever dared to under the fear to appear juvenile and immature. But how can you offer free chocolate to a girl without going to Honeydukes? Fleur admitted that French liked sugary pastries a lot but were rather poor in sweets. Seeing Fleur sucking on a lolly or a sugar quill made more than one man's mouth water. Harry snickered at that, they were so obvious...



Zonko was a treasure for all pranksters. Fleur was one of a kind though. 'Never get on her bad side' Harry mused, watching her choose amongst the nastier tricks, cackling. He guessed she had some planned revenge to deal on some of her own companions. They took a few butterbeers at the Three Broomsticks to go and some sandwiches. Harry asked her if it would bother her to check out the local library for some books, in case they had anything worthy in the runes department. He quickly found out there why Hermione revered Hogwarts's library. They already had them all. He knew some of them by heart. Fleur was looking at some Arithmancy essay when he got back at her.

"Those formula are way too rigid! They allow no creativity in spellcasting," she complained, showing him the book.

Harry held his hand up defensively, smiling.

"That's gibberish to me! I never took that course. I don't like math that much," he apologized.

She smiled mockingly at him.

"There are things that you can't do! I was beginning to wonder!"

Harry whispered to her in a falsely scared tone. "Yes! But don't tell anybody! That would ruin my image with girls!"

Fleur snorted and put her book back in place. They got out of the building, not buying anything. They got back to Hogwarts and Fleur could not help but laugh when Harry asked her if she wanted to mount his broomstick, wiggling his eyebrows.

She liked to fly too and had one of the latest brooms on the market. Not as recent as his Firebolt, but still. She asked him for a complete aerial tour of the grounds...at breakneck speed. Never the towers saw such a rush. They flew over the lake and the forbidden forest, sharing the sky with a few hippogriffs. They had a blast. He landed near the carriage of Beauxbatons as the sun was setting. It was almost too good to be true.

"Nothing combs your hair like a good wind!" she said, shaking her long silvery blond locks. "I see we like the same hair stylist!" she said mockingly.

"What? You need a stylist? It's all natural for me!" assured Harry, his hand going through his hair in a model imitation.

"I'll never win, will I?" she asked, a hand on her hip.

"I don't know. Keep trying though! I remember you were on top once..."

Most girls would have been indignant and insulted. Fleur was not most girls. She got close to him, a finger tracing his chest.

"If that's what it takes to win, I'll gladly have another...profound... conversation with you in the greenhouse."

Harry got stiff all of a sudden, like a deer caught in the headlights. Fleur leaned in and kissed him sweetly on the lips, then showed him a proper 'French-kiss', leaving no doubt about her origins. He was quite relaxed by now.

She finally pulled back and waved good-bye before getting in the carriage. Harry weakly waved back, mounted his broom and slowly made his way to the Quidditch lockers where he usually left his Firebolt. He made his way back in the castle with a little spring in his step. He could really get used to this. The way she spoke, she wanted to give him more than enough occasion to.

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By the end of the day, the whole castle knew about the latest developments of Harry Potter's love life. Most guys looked at him, shaking their heads, not believing his luck. Fleur's date for the Ball looked pretty pissed off, he thought he'd had the best chances! But even he wasn't stupid enough to try to take down one of Hogwarts' champions. Especially since Gryffindor house seemed to finally be backing him up.

Harry found Ron and Hermione in a whispered, but quite animated discussion along a corridor. Seeing Harry, it stopped quite suddenly.

"Hey guys! How was your day? Had fun catching up on lost time?" Harry asked them.

They both had the grace to look away shyly and blush. Harry would have so much fun teasing those two. Now and then.

"Harry..." began a frowning Hermione, "...not that I want to be nosey or that I'm... unsatisfied with the current arrangements but...when..."

"She wants to know if you were seeing Fleur before today," said Ron frankly, looking at him square in the eyes.

Harry was glad. He would stand up for her, even to him. But he was relieved too as he'd thought it was more serious than that!

"Of course not! In a way, yes, but no! It's all a very funny story actually. I turned her down to go to the Yule Ball a few days after asking you, Hermione. She was quite frustrated. Then she followed us in the park last night. She heard and saw all that happened, and what didn't. Seeing that I was free... she left a rose on my bed."

"A rose!" exclaimed Hermione. "How romantic! So very French!"

"Yeah. It ended up being a portkey leading to my greenhouse where she had gotten said rose. She asked to talk somewhere warmer, so we went in the greenhouse," he explained slowly.

"And she asked you out?" asked Ron, mildly surprised.

"More like demanded. Heavily. Like pushing me against the door and snogging the hell out of me."

His two friends gawked at him.

"And?" asked Ron, expectantly. For once, Hermione was too curious to reprimand him.

"And... what?" asked Harry, enjoying himself greatly. "You want to know if the rumours are true? If what was said, in public, with obvious eavesdroppers, was true? One thing I learned today is that Fleur is a very cunning and malicious witch. I think she timed her little tirade when a maximum of people around were drinking."

"But...then people said that you said that..." began Ron.

"Of course. The most beautiful and popular girl of a foreign student exchange program claim loudly she had fun riding you all night long and I'm going to go in denial? Smart move."

"You can't entertain rumours about that, Harry!" said Hermione, indignantly. "That's not... well..."

"She started them!" laughed Harry. "She's the first to enjoy them! Since the dragon episode, it seems it became a contest of 'which witch will kiss Harry Potter first' in the Beauxbatons carriage!"

"If that's what started it, Potter..." said a drawling voice from behind, "then they might have an 'encore'."

Draco, passing them by, smashed a Daily Prophet not so gently in Harry's chest and walked away. Harry took the paper and read the headline of the front page.

"The Hungarian wants a rematch?" Harry read in the Headline.

"It's coming, Potter. They lost it at the reserve. Better prepare for a live performance, without any chains around its neck this time!" said Draco loudly from further down the corridor.

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The next few days, Harry did worry. What if they were right? What if the Hungarian horntail he defeated in the Tournament waited for her egg to hatch, for them to be independent (which seem to take a couple of weeks, most), and then took the sky to search for him and get even. He found the egg pretty cool back then and asked the

Headmaster to get rid of the charm on it that make it repeat the mermaid speech. He did so with a flick of his wand and a smile. Harry planned on carving runes on it and put his more expensive stuff in it. Now, he planned on exchanging it to a dragon in order not to become a 'Harry kebab'.

Luna assured him he was being silly. If the dragon showed up at Hogwarts, managing to get past the defence wards at the edge of the Forbidden Forest to keep the dangerous beast at a safe distance, there were more than enough able wizards to take it down. Maybe Harry wouldn't even notice until Hagrid's next Care for Magical Creature's class. Harry smiled widely and admits it was probably simple irrational fear. But it was a dragon after all.

Ron took a different alley to comfort him.

"Fighting a free dragon one on one... You'd have to choose the battlefield. The Hungarian horntail is a classical fang-claw-fire type. You would do well to use gillyweed once again and dive in the lake. He'll lose his flight advantage. Then you can either shoot at him from underwater or flip out of it periodically like I heard you did at the start of the Second Task to cast something in its wings. If it touches water, it's done for. It can't swim well at all. Then you flip from behind on its back, run up to the head and cast a point blank range stunner between the eyes or target the inside of the ear to hit the brain directly..."

Harry was looking at him with wide eyes.

"I knew I would have needed your help on the First Task! I knew it! Dammit!"

Ron came back from his dragon-fall plotting and blinked. He scratched behind his head, smiling shyly.

Things got quieter after that. The spring was in full swing when the champions were asked to come to the Quidditch pitch in preparation for the Third Task. As soon as they saw the forming edges, Krum simply declared: "A labyrinth."

Cedric, Fleur and Harry nodded. As they were about to go back, Krum asked for a moment alone with Harry. He complied, nodding toward Fleur, meaning that he would join her later. They had an unofficial and very ambiguous relation. To the outsider's eyes, they were shamelessly flirting in public, sometime telling each other off for being a 'little boy', a 'pampered princess', a 'scared four-eyes' or a 'flat Barbie'. Fleur had to do some research to understand that one, but once she found out who exactly was Barbie, she took great time, in private, to make him realize how well filled out she was. Harry knew that part of her anatomy quite well by now. For both their enjoyment.

They agreed, despite how well they were doing together, that this relation would not last past the school year. Fleur recognized the powerful, flaming and lustful relation this was and explained they should end it while all was still on good terms. Harry was sad, since he liked her a lot. He admitted to her that he would make the most of the time they were allowed together. How could she blame him? She was incredibly hot after all.

Harry wondered if she'd like to keep light correspondence or if she'd think he's trying to stick around too much. He had to shake his head lightly as it would not be a good idea to be distracted while speaking alone, far from eyes, with the Bulgarian champion. He prepared to go for his wand if needed. Who knew what goes in his head?

"Harry Potter... What is your relation with Hermione Granger?" he asked directly.

Harry blinked twice. Of all the questions... He wanted to speak about girls. He was looking at him seriously. Almost...intimidating. Angry? Why? Isn't he aware of his status with Fleur? He'd be the only one...

"She's my best friend. I'm blessed enough to have two of those. Why?" he asked curiously.

"I heard..." he began, uncomfortable.

"That I was going out with her. I thought that the gossip about Fleur and I was more than enough to outdo that one about me and Hermione at the Yule Ball."

"So...You're not involved with her." Krum stated clearly.

"Nope. Like a forever best friend to me," answered Harry happily.

Krum looked relieved.

"I left that to my other best friend, Ronald Weasley. To be romantically involved with Hermione that is. They hooked up the day after the Ball."

The expression on Krum could have been funny if Harry was a heartless bastard.

"What? Who?" asked the Durmstrang champion, looking panicked.

"Ronald Weasley. The red-haired boy I had to rescue from the lake in the Second Task."

Viktor's memory kicked in and he smiled crossly.

"Him. That won't be an obstacle," he said confidently.

Harry's eyes and demeanour steeled.

"Don't take him lightly. He packs up more than he looks. I would not trust my back to an incompetent man."

"He's still only fourteen. Like yourself by the way," Krum stated, menacingly.

"And you're arrogant, which level the playing field. You're the perfect target for a surprise attack, you underestimate him from his looks."

Viktor grimaced.

"You should not stay out late, Potter. The dragon might come and get you," Krum sneered.

Harry smiled crookedly.

"I don't think about it much. Ron designed for me a three point plan to beat it in less than five minutes. Try to talk to Hermione though. She might agree for a long-distance correspondence."

Viktor looked at him, confused.

"Why are you telling me that?"

Harry caught something on his peripheral vision.

"Because..."

Then he lost all traces of a smile and drew his wand in a flash. The speed he used took Krum so much by surprise he simply froze. He had his guard down.

"Behind you, Krum. Get over here," Harry told him, looking at something over his shoulder.

Seeing that he already had him, he had no reason to make things up decided Krum. He wiped out his wand and turned to see a stumbling form come out of the woods.

"Oh god..." sighed Harry, seeing the state Mr. Crouch was in, looking totally lost.

"The Forbidden Forest is exactly that, forbidden. Didn't you read the school rules, Mr. Crouch?" said Harry, catching him before he fell to the ground.

"Potter...Potter....Dumbledore...get..." and then his face lightened up. He started spouting things about NEWT, a son, a wife and some other non-sense.



Krum looked as lost as he felt. Harry's gears turned again, trying to make something out of this.

"It looks like...some kind of memory spell damage or something," Harry stated, trying to figure it out.

"Post-Imperio Shock Syndrome. PISS," Krum said matter-of-factly. "A lasting one I'd say. What you said helped me remember that. It's the first time I've actually seen one. Or even heard of a case, since..."

"Since Voldemort's last rise to power," ended Harry, seeing Krum wince and looked up at Harry in surprise.

"Which mean that either he or one of his Death Eater did this. We can't let him out of both our guard. We have to get him to the Hospital Wings, wands drawn." stated Harry.

Viktor acknowledged the plan and they each took an arm of the delirious man to practically drag him forward.

Moody came running to them, limping, from their right side.

"Potter? What's happening? I saw something in one of my foe mirror and I came as fast as..."

"HAAA!!! YOU! Let me alone! Let me go! Let go of me! Get out, get out, GET OUT!!" yelled Crouch at Moody, trashing in Harry's and Viktor's support.

Moody stopped, looking panicked and unsure. Harry saw something strange in his eyes. Maybe Crouch was insane, but he wasn't violent the second before. He was about to ask Moody what Crouch meant but he didn't have to. He locked eyes with Mad-Eye. Harry simply knew this wasn't Alastor Mad-Eye. The impostor realized he just been found out. He drew his wand but Harry already had his out.

"Expelliarmus!"

The man in front of him managed to dodge sideways, out of the way of the curse in an impressive show of reflex.

"Aveda Kedavra!"

Harry thought that was it, for a moment, but Crouch choose that moment to escape his loosening grip and tried to get away. He walked straight in the spell's paths and fell down on the ground, eyes empty of all life.

Krum and Harry aligned the murderer with both their wand and prepared to launch some nasty curses while the enemy was sprawled on the ground, having fallen down from his sudden dodging earlier. The impostor tugged something in his coat and disappeared. The boys stared in shock at the empty spot in front of them, wands still at the ready. Viktor put it away, looking around.

"I doubt he activated an invisibility device. More like an emergency portkey," he said.

Harry sighed loudly, tired.

"Yeah. Must be it. Damn it all. What does it all mean?"

Krum shrugged his shoulders. Harry took a tissue and engorged it enough to cover the body of the dead Ministry official. Krum cast a mobilicorpus and they made their way inside. The first student they met was told to get the Headmaster.

They made it halfway to his office when he got to them, walking briskly. Harry whispered the identity of the body under the cover and he was motioned to bring him in the Hospital wing. They walked in silence, people making way for the two champions and the Headmaster. They closed the door of the infirmary behind them and Dumbledore cast some privacy spell. Krum and Harry then told him what happened, leaving out no details. Dumbledore seemed to take a few more years on his face. Harry saw the weight of responsibility rest on the wizard's shoulder. It was the price to pay for his fame, his talents and his position. Harry didn't envy him at all. But he understood the need for it to be done.

"Headmaster. I request some time in the next few days for a talk," asked Harry seriously. "We have much to discuss."

Dumbledore took in his determined face and simply nodded. Viktor and Harry left, in serious thought and went to his greenhouse by pure reflexes, it being the best place to think. A strange sight waited for him in there. Neville was talking with Ron, Hermione and... Fleur? Oh yeah. He mentioned to her to wait for him.

"What happened, Harry?" asked Hermione at once, concerned, as he entered the glass building. "The rumours said someone's...body was carried by you and Viktor at the Hospital Wing!"

Ron was about to say something but seemed to think better. Fleur was looking at Harry with concern too. Neville looked like a nervous wreck. His usual state when things went bad.

"It was Mr. Crouch," revealed Harry. General gasp.

"Yeah. I was having a mature, man to man discussion with Krum including menace and innuendo when Mr Crouch came out of the Forbidden Forest, looking really bad. As if he crossed the place forth and back without a wand. He was spouting non-sense and Krum recognized the after-effect of an Imperio curse used on long period of time. We were taking him to the infirmary and Moody got to us. Crouch reacted violently and we understood this wasn't Mad-Eye. Realizing we saw through him, he tried to kill us, starting by me. Mr. Crouch, trying to escape, got in the way of the killing curse. The impostor took a portkey and escaped. That's all that happened. Now, I still have to figure out what it mean."

"Who would do such a thing, would go to such length and with what motives? Why use an Imperio on an official?" asked Fleur.

Hermione shook her head, having no answer. Ron was deep in thoughts.

"He was a pawn. No. A knight. His movement got him inside the enemy's line. Crouch was a pawn he sacrificed for damage control."

Harry looked at Ron, letting him process the puzzle. Harry could see stuff with his rune technique, but he needed more elements. Ron's analytic mind of people themselves was best adapted to the situation.

"They played first," he kept on. "They're black. To beat them, we need to learn how many pieces are still left in the play and where they are. Our pieces are easy to figure out. The champions are towers. Their moves are predictable, but hard to counter."

"Who are the kings?" asked Fleur, knowing a little something about chess.

"The Black king is probably V-v-Voldemort himself. Buried way back in the play, never showing himself or taking any risk. Our white King..."

He looked up to Harry.

"Is forced to play like a tower, taking many risks, being at predictable places and putting the whole game at risk. But why such length, as you said earlier? Moody, whoever that was, was around Harry all year! Even alone with him a few times!"

They went silent and Ron took back where he left, answering his own question.

"He wants a face-off. The Black king wants to kill the White one personally. The problem is: when will they get face to face? How will he drag you behind his lines? If that happen, it's going to be a whole new game."

Harry sighed and put his head in his hands.

"I really need a strong Queen then. Who's proposing for the title?!"

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I hope you like how things are turning out! Stay tuned for more!

Author Note: Yay! Double update!

Disclaimer: This fanfiction is not about Harry Potter. It's about his clone I made up from stem cells. Ha! try to take him away now! MWOUHAHAHA!!!

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Time passed once again and Harry worried more and more. He got the meeting he asked for with Dumbledore but he didn't learn anything more than anybody else at Hogwarts already knew. The true Moody was found in his magical trunk after it was forced open. He was in too bad of a shape to keep teaching, and missed his magical eye. Percy Weasley, who was chosen to replace Mr. Crouch as judge, was given the task to be the interim teacher for DADA. He could, at least, teach theory and the basics. The Weasley was horrified by the curriculum of his predecessor. He went to a strict study-practice schedule that, at fault of being original, kept them up to date.

Harry didn't mind much. He was studying and progressing on his own. To develop some awareness and awaken the muscles he neglected this year for rune books, Harry had his friend throwing spells at him. He simply had to dodge. Ron, Hermione and Luna were sending tripping jinxes one after another. Hermione winced more than once when he landed on his rear, but she understood the need to be aware of your surrounding in a maze.

Stunner, shields, immobilisation, explosion, repelling, attracting, orientation spells and many more were practiced in an endless chain to remember each and every one of them in battle. He even practiced a variant of the snake summoning spell to have scouts in the labyrinth.

Harry's rune project was finally taking form and he started to test it secretly under everyone's nose. It needed a few adjustments, but Luna and he worked restlessly at it. Harry had to take a few days to power up all the runes necessary. The result was grand. Luna and Harry, the day right before the Third task, looked at their work in awe.

"We did it, Luna. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you," Harry said dreamily probably the result of too much time working with the blond Ravenclaw.

"We sure did. And thank you. That's nice of you to say knowing you drew the vast majority of the runes there," she answered modestly.

"In this particular case, you know that the drawing of the runes wasn't the hardest part. Your speed increased something incredible by the way."

"Thank you again, Harry! Practice make perfect, and this project was the perfect opportunity. What are we going to use it with first?" she asked, curious.

Harry smiled wide.

"Don't worry. I know just the perfect thing."

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Fleur, Viktor, Cedric and Harry were standing in front of a humongous wall of green. Harry wondered how they would clean the field of that once they would be done.

"The champions will be going in one after the other, depending on the score they had. The more points they have, the earlier they get in. The order will be: Harry Potter, Fleur Delacour, Cedric Diggory and finally but not the least: Victor Krum! Cheers for those four courageous souls that will face the unknown in this last task!"

Harry really thought that this man was enjoying this too much. Wasn't it a few weeks ago that a judge was Imperious'd and killed? Harry and his friends kept their speculations of that event for themselves, but they didn't forget. This was the perfect occasion for Voldemort to trap him. Harry's moves would be predictable to an extreme in this Task. But how could Voldemort even try to get him? Last time, he didn't even have a body! His rare dreams along the years showed him that much. He had a... form, nothing more. No matter. He was as ready as he could be, given he wasn't allowed anything else than his

wand. But wasn't cheating a part of the Tournament as well? He had one other thing with him, his trump card. He simply had to have the enemy in throwing distance.

"BANG!"

And there he went, running alongside the vegetal walls. He figured that a running target would be harder to hit. If Voldemort was, somehow, waiting for him at the middle of this place, he had to reach him before anyone else.

He passed a boggart in a dementor form but Harry wasn't in the mood to laugh at him. He sent a powerful wind at the ragged dementor's form. He went ass over his feet, landing in an undignified position, his under robes showing white boxers. Harry couldn't help but laugh despite the seriousness of the situation. The boggart weakened a lot, a shadow of what he was but managed to escape. This little fellow won't be scarring anybody anytime soon.

Harry took back to running and almost collided with a creature he hoped never to see again. A Blast-ended Skrewt. The thing tried to burn his fingers all years long! He evaded three fire shots in quick succession and sent a disarming charm. It bounced on the natural armour of the hybrid monster. It tried to snap him in his pincer but Harry's quick shield held him at bay. The boy shot a blasting curse under his numerous legs, flipping him over by the side. The belly, looking weaker, made a perfect target for a full body bind. It snapped all his insect-like legs together, neatly folding them on his belly. He still tried to fire with his unaffected tail, but Harry had his footing intact while he was flaying around. He barely had to dodge. He took a rock and transfigured it in a stone bell. He put a sticking charm on it and, after carefully approaching the struggling creature, fixed it on the end of the tail.

"There you go, little pest. Burn your tail a few times by shooting with it. You'll learn how it feels."

Harry sped away again. He realised he forgot to summon his snakes scouting party at the start and, by such, didn't know where he would have to go next. He used a point-me spell to find north, then rushed

away. He jumped head first in a strange spell barring the whole path and found his world upside down. It lasted only a second, the time he flew through it, and landed painfully on the other side, rolling the best he could to lessen the shock. He barely dusted himself and got back on his mad dash. He thought he was doing pretty good, not taking too much time on each obstacle. He hoped it would be enough.

If it had been anything else than grass under his feet, he would have screeched to halt a few turns later. As it was, he just pulled out two small tufts of the lawn off the ground. Right in front of him stood a sphinx. A bloody sphinx! A female one. What was it with female magical species after his blood?!

"Young Harry Potter. What you seek is just passed me but to go ahead, I must tell you three..."

"STOP! Just one second! Not another word!" said Harry holding up his hands.

The beast's face changed fast. They were peaceful unless you answer wrong one of their riddle, or...if you're rude.

"I know what you're about to say," stated Harry, standing firmly in front of the surprised creature. None had ever dared cut her off this way before. Their anger was legendary. This twerp looked firm and determined. A fool to think he could best her, he must have a death wish. She would let him talk, then rip him to shreds. She warned the bearded man that asked her for the job.

"This..." said Harry, pulling a vial from a hidden pocket, "...is the very essence of a poison. Basilisk fang poison. A beast I killed myself exactly two years ago."

Harry took a stone on the ground, uncorked the vial carefully and let a 'drop' of the vial's content on it. It went through as if it was falling in the air. Harry showed the holed rock to the Sphinx. Meanwhile, the drop landed on the ground and went in. With its enhanced sense, the Sphinx knew it was still digging in the Earth and wasn't ready to stop yet.



"If I throw this at you, you die. The essence will pierce and poison you. You'll be dead within ten seconds, by my estimate. So I have this riddle for you, and you have five seconds to answer it properly: what's the name of the wizard you're going to let pass right now without making a fuss?"

The Sphinx was sweating bullets by now. But seeing the young man slowly pull his arm back in preparation to throw away the vial, she uttered:

"Harry...Potter."

Harry smiled and put a stopper (a rune'd one mind you) on the vial.

"Good answer. Now, remember that if you attack me, it will be as if you just gave a wrong answer to my question."

Harry sped past the beast in a light jog, nodding once as he past her. It was nothing personal. He simply didn't have the time for sitting on his ass and think. Once he was gone, the mythical beast sighed shakily.

"Accept this trip to England, mom said. It's going to be a change from the sand and wind she said! But she never said anything about twelve years old humans who kill basilisks!"

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Harry turned a corner and saw it, some distance away. The cup! The goal of this entire bloody event! Seeing no Voldemort waiting behind a bush to jump on him, he sped toward it, passing a few other passages that led there. He was a mere two meters from the glowing cup when he heard a surprised yelp. Harry turned to see Cedric in a losing battle with a spider. Quite the spider in fact. Probably an acromantula from the Forest.

"Expelliarmus!" yelled Harry, hitting the spider, only for it to bounce (again!) off of the hard skeleton-like skin. The eight-legged monster ignored him and bit a struggling Cedric in the leg.

"Araknophobia!" yelled Harry, not even covering Cedric's scream of pain. The spider repulsive light seemed to hurt its eyes bad but it didn't seem in any hurry to let Cedric's leg go. Harry concentrated hard on his wand and tried an alteration of the spell, focussing the light in a ray by 'pulling' the source of light further down his wand, near the core. The funnel of the wood did its job focussing the output of magic in a beam that became so powerful that Harry simply cut the spider in two, not even scratching Cedric as it passed over him.

Harry helped him get rid of the pieces of the twitching spider. Harry sent red sparks over his head and turned back toward the cup.

"Sorry Cedric. At least, when it's going to be all over, someone will be able to look at your leg." he said.

The Hufflepuff champion looked down, sideway, cursing between his teeth. His house would end up second. Again. Harry had no regret whatsoever. To allow Cedric to get the cup would be a show of pity and an even worse insult. They both did their best. Harry grabbed the cup and his last words shocked Cedric somewhat.

"Shit, not again!"

-----

Harry got up from his unexpected trip, wand drawn. He was in the middle of a cemetery. It was deeply dark. He could not see much around. Only a cauldron sitting in the middle of the tombs. A cauldron? The split second distraction was all it took for Harry to lose his only advantage: the knowledge it was a trap. Two distinct pains hit him at the same time. The one of his scar flaring up, signalling the near presence of Voldemort and a bone-breaking curse hex hitting his left leg. He had no chance of staying up after that. He was squirming on the ground in agony until a rasping voice could be heard.

"Not yet...Not now, my loyal servant. He needs to be able to participate to this...friendly gathering."

Harry found enough control to roll sideway, looking at the source of the voice. Strangely, Harry knew it wasn't the once-handsome man

that talked. More...like the bundle in his arms, wrapped in a blanket. A form he remembered seeing in his dream.

"Hu...Homunculus..." he managed to whisper.

"Potter! You do have a brain and use it!" said the small, inhuman form in the bundle.

"Looks like you had nobody around...to make the rune cluster for you to evolve...past that form!" said Harry, panting but managing the pain. He even found the strength to chuckle.

"Enough! Crucio!" squealed the flesh in the rag, pointing a wand on Harry.

The pain came back tenfold, so intolerable he could not distinguish it from the one of his scar. He was quickly let out of it, spasms of pain running through him, worsening his leg injury.

"Enough," he heard a weak voice say in a daze. "Let's begin."

The man smiled like only a fanatic could. He lit the cauldron and sent the water to boil in a few instant.

"Bones of the father," he began, disdaining dripping from his voice, "unwillingly given." Broken bones flew from the ground, summoned by his wand. He sent them with a flick in the cauldron. He held his wand over his arm, eyes looking at the sky, maniac fervour lighting his voice.

"Flesh of the servant, WILLINGLY SACRIFICED! Diffindo!" He yelled the last part of the incantation with more than a hint of madness, though no hesitation, in his voice. The man screamed in pain as he cut his arm all the way to his elbow, letting it drop in the forming mixture. Harry was horrified of what was happening in front of his eyes. He could practically feel the darkness rolling all around them. The man, summoning a simple rope to stunt the flow of blood, and making it squeeze his arm hard enough to keep him awake, went to Harry, grabbed him by the collar and hoist him up against the

cauldron, his back against the rim. Harry screamed at his turn, feeling the searing hot metal burning him through his light champion's cloth.

"Blood...of the enemy..." began the man, a look of pure hate twisting his trait, "Forcibly taken!" With his untouched hand, he grabbed a long dagger and stabbed Harry right through his shoulder. Harry's scream renewed as a light flow of blood spread behind him, falling in the cauldron as it ran down the blade. The mixture looked nothing like the original water that was in it. It became of an indescribable dark colour. The man swat Harry away from the boiling cauldron, and went to the bundle in the cloth rag and dropped it in the mix.

A part of Harry screamed 'Yes! Let it drown! Boil it alive!' But his rational side told him the horrors of the night were only beginning. Unfortunately, his rational side won. The bulging form that rose from the cauldron was undeniably human. The flesh was pale, of a greyish white, playing over sizable muscles. The...the thing looked at himself, as if getting used to its new form, relearning how to move around. He presented a pale long hand to his knelt servant, who seemed to have trouble keeping his balance. He gave some kind of bony wand to...it. Harry could not deny the truth anymore. This thing... it... was Voldemort. Tom Riddle was reborn.

"Your arm, Crouch," he said, barely above a whisper.

'Crouch?' though Harry, confused. 'Mr. Crouch had a Death Eater son?'

The man showed his intact wrist, displaying his dark mark for all to see. Voldemort, having summoned dark robes over himself, looked at him with almost affectionate eyes. If it wasn't for the evil glint he had in it and the crooked smile that is.

"So loyal... I need you undamaged, Barty Crouch Jr. Your other arm."

Gratefully, Crouch Jr. showed his freely bleeding lump to his Lord. From the dark wizard's wand left some silvery wisp who attached itself to the mutilated arm perfectly, stopping the bleeding at once. Barty looked at his new arm in awe and hit the ground with it, sending

a small shockwave strong enough for Harry to feel it. It was dangerous.

"Now...for this little party to begin," said Voldemort, taking a light hold of the original arm that Crouch brought back right up, giving him access to his dark mark. As Voldemort put his wand on it, Harry saw Crouch clench his teeth, shaking, but never letting a sound out.

Forms in dark robes began to appear in quick succession all around them, in circle, taking a very precise place, kneeling. Voldemort seemed to have forgotten about Harry though he knew it was merely an illusion... He was just setting the stage. Where would Harry go anyway? His left leg was shattered, his left shoulder was burning up, bleeding lightly and he didn't even have his wand. He lost it after the first Crucio.

"My loyal servants... my dear Death eaters. How quick were you all to answer my call, as if we just last met yesterday! Malfoy! Look at how good you look! The years have treated you well. You... were not disembodied, roaming the realms not alive nor dead..."

"My Lord! If I had only the slightest clue you hadn't truly disappeared that night..."

"FOOL! Didn't I tell you, tell you all, that I am immortal?! That the path I followed toward eternal life, I followed it further than anyone else? When I was in need of help, where were you? WHERE? Rockwood! McNair! Crabbe! Goyle! Where were you all?!"

Voldemort was ripping masks left and right, showing their faces for all to see.

"To even consider that this... this CHILD could be the end of me!" ended Voldemort, pointing a bony finger to Harry. Only now did they seem to be aware of his presence.

"My Lord..." dared Lucius Malfoy, "How did you get the brat out of Dumbledore's clutches, while he was still attending school?"

"You would like to know now, Malfoy, would you?"

But the silver-blond haired man knew he'd just struck a cord on his master's vanity.

"Let me tell you how! After this unfortunate event, thirteen years ago, I became a wandering wraith. I did not foresee that useless wench to make a blood protection by sacrificing herself for her offspring. Mr. Potter became invulnerable to all spell I would cast on him, including the killing curse. I found out, ten years later, with the useless professor Quirell, that a single touch from this weak boy makes me suffer unimaginable pain to my very soul. I lost all strength I got from drinking unicorn blood and I fled to Albania's forests, possessing small animals along the way, snakes being able to hold me the longest. Then, a true servant came to me."

At that, Voldemort stopped in front of Crouch Jr. Many eyes lit up in recognition, wondering how this could be possible. That was two men who came back from the dead that night.

"Contrarily to what most of you are thinking right now, Barty Crouch Jr. wasn't dead. He stayed loyal to me all along, prisoner of his own father Imperious. How fitting that the son resisted his father, broke the hold and trapped the jailor with the same curse. He travelled all the way to Albania, where rumours of a dark shadow in the woods, leaving a trail of dead animals indicated my presence. He spent days yelling my name until he found me. He fed me with unicorn blood and Nagini's milk, my dearest pet. His great care gave me enough strength to assume a physical presence and be reborn, tonight, using an old, dark ritual. I guess...I can...touch...you...now..." finished Voldemort, touching Harry's scar with a finger...and there was pain. Again. But only for Harry. Always. Voldemort smiled in triumph.

"Now that I benefit your mother's protection against me, touching you isn't so bad. Except from the fact that you are the filthy son of a bitch and a Potter, of course."

Voldemort was about to tell about the Tournament, Barty's ingenious switch with Mad-Eye and the trophy turned into a portkey in a last infiltration of Hogwart's grounds. But Harry, knowing he would die

here anyway, decided he would not let this Dark Jerk do all the talking.

"Son...of a bitch and a Potter, hun?" he said, gathering his strengths. "Well it's better than to be the son of an inbred witch and a treacherous muggle father! You, who pledge so much on blood purity, are practically the son of a squib and a magicless thug! Ha! Some kind of "pureblood" model you are, aren't you, Tom Marvolo Riddle?"

"SILENCE! Don't DARE you utter the name of that man! I am Lord Voldemort, and you're better to remember it! Crucio!"

Harry squirmed again wondering if it would ever end. After a full minute, Voldemort let the curse down.

"Get up! You think you're something? You think you can beat me, maybe? That I FEAR you, perhaps? GET UP! Let's duel as true wizard! Your luck end tonight!"

Harry was on his back, panting hard.

"UP! Crouch, give him back his wand!" yelled the Dark Lord in a blind fury.

Harry was painfully hoisted up, only to fall down once again.

"ARGH! Idiot!" Harry said, turning to Crouch. "You broke my leg when I first got here! How could I stand?!"

On Barty's face passed a look of panic. He didn't want his earlier enthusiasm to displease his already angry Lord. He shoved Harry's wand in his hand and threw a spell on the defective leg. It bound it hard and straight. The pain as the bone was forced back into place was brief but sent Harry screaming again, finding his sore voice breaking down in the middle of a shout. The spell did nothing for the pain, but he could stand up straight with minimal effort on that leg. Crouch shoved a pepper-up potion down Harry's throat and another that must be a blood replenishing one. The Death Eater circle seemed to greatly enjoy Harry's predicament.

"Are you finally ready now, Potter? Or do you need a towel? A bossy bookworm to tell you which spell to cast maybe? Oh yes, Potter. I know," purred Voldemort.

Harry looked at him, eyes as hard as steel. If he was to die, it wouldn't be as an insecure teen.

"What are you afraid of, when you look at me, Tom?" asked Harry slowly.

"I am Lord Voldemort, learn it already!" the Dark Lord yelled back.

Before he could cast another cruciatus, Harry kept the conversation rolling.

"Come on, Tom! We're old acquaintances. We should be more familiar. Call me Harry."

Harry knew he would be in a world of pain, but he wanted Voldemort to lose as much credibility as possible.

"Crucio!" yelled Voldemort, moving his wand deadly fast.

Harry leaned on the left painfully, on his bad leg, almost tumbling over. He knew it would not give up on him since the binding made it impossible to bend. To his surprise, the simple move got him out of the path of Voldemort's spell! He would have to check out something, he thought, getting back to his original position, favouring his right leg.

"Oops! Missed! You haven't answer me yet. What are you afraid of? Not of my broken, limping self, that's for sure!" taunted Harry.

"Imperio!"

Darn. That spell didn't seem to shoot out of his wand like others. It was a direct effect. He didn't have much time to ponder on it though, as his mind was blissfully blank of everything. No more pain. He was simply floating in a never ending numbness.



"Let's duel, Potter," said a voice. Harry didn't care... even if he was...compelled to obey the voice.

"Bow before your adversary, Potter. It's simple courtesy before dieing. Come on, bow to me..."

Harry was about to do it, but some nagging memories stopped him from doing so. What was he doing again?

"Bow, Harry... by the waist...Surely your parents taught you to be polite...Oops! Sorry, They're dead! Come on now, BOW!"

Oh yeah! He was trying to piss Voldemort off!

Just like that, with another mental push toward consciousness, Harry regained his free will. But there was no need for him to know that. Harry bowed to him. Harry learned from Ron that pride was a very bad thing to cling to. As well bid his time.

"Very well, Harry Potter!" said Voldemort under the chorus of chuckling. "And now, you will..."

"Expelliarmus!"

A moment of silence. The sound of someone catching a wand in mid-air rang like a gong in a church. Harry had gotten good at this spell, fast and accurate. He had Voldemort's wand now.

"Enough, Tom. Let's see now. You can't be afraid of me. So you're afraid of what I might become."

Voldemort's face changed for a fraction of a second. Harry didn't miss it. There was something in what he said that got through to him. He didn't have the time to find out what right now.

"You DARE resist the master! You're going to DIE!!!" yelled a seething Crouch Jr.

He sent the first spell of many to come. The death Eaters figured that they didn't want to be judged on their inaction. Harry managed to cast

two spell with one incantation, one with each wand, Voldemort's wand answering disturbingly well. The two shields held up the time he took to get behind a rock. Was he glad Hermione and Luna trained him so hard to get his protego so strong! Unfortunately, he was hit by a disarming charm as he dove behind the rock. No! Those spell target the wand arm! His wand! His protective rock was pummelled by a flurry of spells, chipping it slowly away. Voldemort was probably enraged beyond measure to allow this. Harry figured he had one last chance. He'd have to summon the trophy back to him, hoping it would portkey him back to Hogwarts. But it would surely be hit if he tried doing it under this shower of spell. He cast a sonorous charm on himself, hoping it would be enough to be heard.

"Coward! Not even able to take down a child without your army! I was right! You're afraid of me! That's why you've always try to kill me!"

"STOP!" yelled Voldemort to his troops.

That was all Harry was hoping for. He summoned the cup putting as much pull in the spell as he could. A lone spell, carefully aimed, took it out in a million pieces, shattering it like Harry's last hope of getting out of there.

"Come on, Potter! You're the one now hiding and trying to flee! Nobody's attacking you! You want to face me so bad? Let's finish this."

Harry got out from behind his rock, figuring Voldemort would order a full assault if he stayed there.

"Crucio!"

Harry was unprepared. It didn't matter much. He could not have been able to dodge it. His vision was blurry. He was still slowly losing blood despite the potion keeping him alive. His reflexes were dulled from the constant use of magic, the cruciatus and the escape from the mind control.

"Already down? So you simply got lucky earlier. Again. I didn't know you to be so...cunning! Like a little snake...Well then, we're as well to put you out of your misery. Aved..."

Harry was looking up at the, thing, that would be his death, right in the eyes. Then his death's eyes bulged wide comically, like his mouth. Then, his death disappeared. With a small 'pop'. Apparition? Then, flames swallowed the place Tom was the instant prior. The two death eaters that were behind him didn't have that chance. Harry thought, in his dazed state, that it wasn't such a good thing at this moment to be Voldemort's right hand as he saw Barty Crouch Jr. in flames running away. A massive form landed in front of him, blocking him from the Death Eater's sight. It roared deafeningly at everyone present, challenging them to attack. Harry's vision came into focus somewhat and he managed to raise his head high enough to see the massive head of a dragon turn toward him. A Hungarian horntail. Harry would have bet his Firebolt it was a female.

"Hey...long time no see, Sweetie. How're you doing?" Harry croaked, having seen too much to care if a dragon swallowed him at this instant.

The fire beast seemed to give him a once over look before turning back, showing fangs, toward the raising voices.

"Stupefy!" yelled a chorus of voices.

They were about fifteen wizards. Including a Dark Lord. But this was a mean dragon, on its good day. And now, for reasons know by itself alone, she was pissed off. The curses bounced off of her, even if one managed to blow a large scale and scratch the skin under it. She roared again and blasted fire in a wide line in front of her. Some shields rose, most failed and more burning and screaming figures could be seen. The dragon heard, smelled and saw the people weakening under her assault. She could smell their fear and charring flesh! But she didn't pursue the fleeing ones or the fallen, rolling on the ground. She turned toward the small human behind her on the ground. It was struggling to get up. She could feel bad magic on him. Bad magic in him. He smells of blood, his own. Her master needed her. She opened a wing and he clumsily fell on it. She brought it back

up carefully, positioning him sprawled on her back. She never had a human ride on her back before. It felt... right. With him. He seemed to grab some of the bigger scale on her back, understanding what she was about to do. What a smart master! She didn't even smell a hint of fear from him. Good. He was ready enough. She would show her master how to really fly. Not like some of those human on a stick...

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It was almost three hours now. Three hours since Cedric saw Harry disappear with the cup. The news Severus told him of were not good at all. A while ago, his mark appeared as clear as if it had been branded the day prior. A call was made to all Death Eaters. Karkaroff was gone without a trace. The Headmaster of the greatest magical school of Britain felt helpless. The Minister stayed around, even called a few Aurors to help searching for the new Tri-Wizard Champion. He still had a thousand Galleons to give in prize. It was getting late and Dumbledore kindly offered rooms for the guests of the last Task to wait until morning in case of any changes. They didn't have to wait that long.

"Headmaster!" said a panicked transfiguration teacher, bursting in his office. "The dragon! The escaped dragon is in sight! He managed, somehow, to pass the ward against hostile creatures!"

Albus Dumbledore let his arms drop on his desk. Now of all the moments! He slowly got up, having no other choice than to face the new threat.

"I guess you already made the call to the dragon's handlers and the other teachers to meet outside. Did you tell the Auror force present? We'll need as much trained people as possible."

He made his way down from his office, under the wary eye of Minerva McGonagall. Since Harry disappeared, he seemed to lose his drive, little by little. They got as far as ten meters from the great wall at the entrance of the castle. About forty wizards and witches, composed of Aurors and the teaching staff, waited for Albus to lead them. As he got there, the dragon simply dropped down from the sky in front of them all, taking them by surprise. They expected a great show of fire

upon his arrival. Not the silent landing right in front of them. Many moved back, panicked, turning sideways to prepare to run away.

Unexpectedly, the dragon didn't roar. It didn't breathe fire upon them. Having had to deal with more than one dragon in his youth, Dumbledore knew instantly that something was wrong. Maybe...the ward simply let it pass instead of it breaking through. He approached the beast slowly, warily, with a hand up for the wizards behind him to hold their fire.

The beast turned its neck toward its back and slowly got something off of it, carefully, unfolding one of its wings. 'Not something....someone.' thought Albus as he ran toward the rolling body, preventing it to hit the ground. His heart beats accelerated as he saw the boy he tried to protect against fate.

"Fawkes! Please, my friend! I need you!"

The phoenix answered his old friend's call, landing on Harry and taking in his state. Tears didn't take long to appear, flowing on Harry's shoulder, closing the wound. Harry was so pale. He opened his eyes, taking in his surrounding. He found strength to smile as he saw Albus in his field of vision. He spoke softly, throwing looks at his new winged friend.

"Can I keep her? Please?!"

Albus managed a chuckle and wiped his eyes from his own tears threatening to flow. Harry's face changed to an alarming serious one in an instant and whispered one last thing, one last bomb, before fainting slowly.

"He's back, professor. Voldemort is back..."

-----

Harry woke up, tired, in the Hospital wing. At least, he wasn't hurting like crazy anywhere. His shoulder barely itched, his head felt somewhat heavy but no headache, and his leg was mended and itched too. Madam Pomfrey wasn't kidding in second year when she

said it was easier to mend broken bones than grow them back. He endured worst. Now to focus his senses outward. What woken him? Probably the loud voices almost yelling. He opened his eyes to see blurry forms at his side and more blurry forms approaching. Strange. Usually, the nurse never let anyone breathe too loudly around recovering patients. He took his glasses from the bed side and put them on. The Minister was shouting at Dumbledore, who was trying to calm him, Minerva clearly annoyed at their side. Pomona Pomfrey appeared, asking in a severe voice what this was all about, that a student tried to rest from severe injuries. Harry guessed it was him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Pomfrey. I need to talk to Mister Potter about all of this non-sense! The return of You-Know-Who! After thirteen year without a sign? Absurd!"

"Minister. We have evidences..."

"You have NOTHING Dumbledore! I let you rule this place without interference long enough! Employing ex-Death Eaters at that!"

Harry slowly put the gears in motions. If the ministry followed the leader...that they keep their head buried in the sand of denial...They would probably go as far as controlling the medias for the population to share their point of view. The picture wasn't pretty. Voldemort would have all the needed time to prepare a major come back. He had to play the Minister to reveal what really happened. He had to play him so that everybody thought that it was the Minister's idea to tell Britain of Voldemort's return. Harry's gear turned some more and he sighed. It would be fun but...he would have liked to sleep some more. To forget what he saw and live for a while. It was probably the last thing he wanted to re-live again. He touched Hermione slightly, who was looking at the heated exchange. She turned sharply toward him, mouth open in surprise. Harry hastily put a finger on her lips.

"Whatever I say, Hermione, follow it. I know I'm asking you to lie to a ministry official, but it must be done. Trust me." Her eyes got fearful but she nodded once. He could count on her.

"NO Dumbledore! I refuse to stop thirteen years of peace on the words of a delusional boy!"

Dumbledore was about to lose his calm toward Fudge but Harry choose that moment to make his presence remembered.

"Actually, you are right, Minister," Harry said casually.

The Mister, like everyone else, turned toward Harry. The Headmaster seemed relieved to see him awake, but confused by his words.

"What do you mean, Mr. Potter?" asked Fudge, unsure he understood well.

"I was delusional. The criminal Barty Crouch junior, the Death Eater that escaped earlier this year under the shape of Alastor Moody, implanted memories in my head to make me believe in a horror story starring You-Know-Who coming back from the dead. It's my friend Hermione here that noticed some of my incoherent behaviour and found that out after searching my mind. Isn't that it, Hermione?"

"Y-yes! He had...overlapping memories. As if he was at two places at the same time! I just had to push pass the memories of You-Know-Who and I clearly saw...that man putting fake memories in Harry's head."

Dumbledore didn't know what game they played and didn't like it one bit. If his primary witness denies everything, how is he going to convince and prepare the Wizarding World? As Fudge closed his eyes, sighing in relief, Harry winked at him, a crooked smile playing on his lips.

"We're not out of the wood yet, Minister. Many people heard my last declaration before, I assume, I fainted. And Barty Crouch Jr. still runs free. There is no asking what's he's going to do: he'll fuel those rumours, killing and making more Dark Marks in the sky, like he told me he did last summer at the Quidditch game."

"That was him? Oh! We'll get him and put him on a blind date with a dementor! Believe me they don't bother kissing on the first date..." said a furious Fudge. He seemed to feel in control once again. Time to play the main card.

"Maybe, but there will always be someone to believe the rumours, or to find advantages from them. We must stop it from spreading here, where it started. Before people goes to sleep tonight and allow it to sink in. I can do that."

"You can?" asked Fudge, disbelieving. "Even the Prophet would have trouble printing a special edition before tomorrow morning."

Harry was right, Fudge controls the Prophet. What he was doing right now seemed even more important than earlier, when it was only conjunctures and wild guesses.

"No paper. I can show them. I worked on a project all year long that would allow a large group of people to view what happened."

"But you said your memory was tempered with..." countered the Minister.

"It's a physical recording. It's totally different than a pensive. It can't be altered as the device was completed only a few days ago in secret," assured him Harry.

Fudge smiled.

"That's great! This is even worth an Order of Merlin for bravery! How much time do you need?" he asked.

"About an hour to get ready."

"Someone else know you're awake, Harry," said Luna, who was at his side too, looking out the window.

Harry turned his head and looked out too, seeing his new flying mount in front of the window, trying to peek inside. Harry slowly got off his bed and walked with uncertain steps toward the window. Madam Pomfrey was about to stop him but even her wouldn't dare putting herself between the Boy-Who-Lived and an overprotective looking dragon. Harry opened the windows and reached to pet his new friend. 'Sweetie' as Harry decided to call her, closed her eyes



and purred deeply as Harry scratched her snout. The boy turned toward the dumbstruck audience and grinned, his other hand scratching behind his head.

"Could we make that two hours? It seems that there is another matter I have to take care of."

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Woot! Flying dragon mount! Can't wait to have mine!!

Author Note: Well, another delayed chapter. Sorry about that. Can't cheat with time, he's holding the dices.

Disclaimer: What do we see in this Harry guy anyway? Pffffff... Keep him, J.K, keep him...

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Luna went ahead with Ron and Hermione to prepare the 'Rune Project Room'. They conjured enough chairs for everyone as soon as they cleared the mess of lying books, open references scrolls, notes and half-eaten lunches.

Harry got there at that moment, just in time to help Luna with the setting of the device itself. He put Sweetie in the care of Hagrid who was at a loss of words of gratitude. A dream came true!

Harry simply presented Hagrid to the dragon, gave a big piece of meat to Hagrid who gave it to Sweetie in turn. She understood he would be her caretaker while Harry would not be there. As he left her, Sweetie was lying in a bed hastily made of straw while Hagrid was brushing her scales with a stainless steel brush. They were both having a great time.

The time allowed finally passed and the room opened for the audience. Fleur was throwing him curious and worried looks. Harry managed a sad smile as he busied himself around a floating device in the middle front of the room. The other champions came in, with front row seats reserved for them. Harry saw the Minister coming in, still trying to comfort people. Harry walked up to him, shook his hand in front of everybody and showed him his seat, telling it would start any minutes now. Many parents were there, on top of the teaching staff and the Aurors that stayed after the search party. The prefects, Head Boy and Head Girl had the privilege to assist too. They all took their seat as they saw the minister take his place. Harry walked in front of the crowd, all looking at him, and tried not to stutter. Of all the times to be nervous! He briefly touched his glasses and began talking.

"Thank you for your patience. I would usually bore you with the technical details of this project that Third year Luna Lovegood and I

worked on this past year. But this is not the time. We have to use it to show a Ministry approved footage. To better explain it, we're going to give you a demonstration instead."

Harry touched his glasses again and a spiral of misty liquid left them to solidify in his hand. Harry put the resulting round crystal in the device he was standing aside of. It floated back to the ceiling. The lights dimmed to almost nothing and the wall behind Harry lit up to a crystal clear image...of themselves! The crowd heard the scene that just happened starting when Harry addressed them replay, in an awesome clarity, from Harry's point of view. The wall turned dark again, the lights came back and the device floated back down at Harry's side, who was sitting on the floor not to bother the viewing.

The muggle raised clapped, exited to see, at long last, the wizard version of a movie theatre. The pureblood wizards were simply awed, having never seen such a thing. Loud overall clapping ended the demonstration. Harry took the crystal that popped out of the projector and pushed it on the side of his glasses, making it disappear.

"Now, for the main program. The events that happened to me right after Cedric Digory saw me vanish, touching the Tri-Wizard Cup. I had the idea of displaying my performance in the Third task as my first presentation, so I recorded the whole event. I want you to remember, before this begin, that even I could not alter the content of this crystal, as it is a physical recording of my environment. It is known by the Prime Minister Fudge sitting here, who wishes for everyone to know the truth of the events of tonight, and what to expect next."

The Minister half-rose from his chair and waved gravely to the crowd who applaud politely. Harry took a crystal, identical to the first, put it in the projector and took his seat beside the Minister.

Everybody saw Harry's hand take the cup as soon as it began. They finally saw exactly what happen in portkey travel! Too bad the images went to fast to see anything. Then, the cemetery came in sight. The cauldron. Harry getting cursed. The...thing...in the blanket. The ritual. Finally, out of the cauldron came Voldemort himself. So caught up they were, so realistic it was, many fought their way out of the room.

The other stayed, paralysed by the images, or remembering that those were exactly that, images. Some simply tried not to attract Voldemort's attention so not to get cursed. Unfortunately, they saw all of this from Harry's point of view. The Minister took Harry's arm and squeezed it hard at this point, almost making him scream.

"What is this? Why are your implanted memories playing?" he asked, furious.

Harry, wincing, turned toward him, serious.

"There are no implanted memories. We lied to you saying I had fake ones. We did that seeing you were about to deny the truth to the public. This, what you see right now, is what happened. You can't dismiss it now. In case you haven't notice, I'm quite popular right now. Tonight, people will see me battle the Dark Lord Voldemort, and get a partial victory. Oppose me, refute this, and a vote of no confidence will be raised against you. Think about this: you can be the leader that pushed us to regain the peace or the coward that will be cast aside for a stronger Minister. If it happens to be a trick, you can always blame me. But if it's true, and believe me it is, and that you do nothing..."

Their hushed conversation was attracting looks from those who managed to get their eyes off the screen. Harry said no more, his message clear.

The duel had the crowd gaping at Harry's audacity. They gaped again, threatening their already short breath, seeing him disarm a Dark Lord. They lost all hope when facing his aborted escape, forgetting it was Harry himself that was showing them all of this. Then, there was the dragon. The movie ended in chaos, the dragon flying away, Harry on its back.

The projector lowered again, as the lights went back on. The crowd was silent. Harry walked to the device and pocketed the ejecting crystal. No way would he lose or destroy it.

"No...No...NO! This...isn't possible! It's you! It's your machine! You made it show this to us. You have no proof at all!" yelled an Auror

Harry didn't know. How could he blame him? His job got quite a lot more dangerous now. But his little outburst started a wind of denial. Angry whispers began and Harry knew the Minister would pick the winning side. He needed to think of something, and fast! His hand brushed his pocket and he knew what to do. He totally forgot.

"Mister Ollivander!" called Harry over the growing tone of the whispers. "I need you to come over here for your expertise," asked Harry firmly.

The old man, being the specialist to perform the weighing of the wands, assisted each task to make sure they always were within regulations. He got up and slowly went in front of the crowd, smiling softly, knowing perfectly what Harry was up to. He held out his hand. Harry grabbed the wand in his pocket and handed it to him. Voldemort's wand.

"Yes. I know that wand very well, I made it. Thirteen inches, rigid with a phoenix feather core. Yew wood. It was sold many years ago to an eleven years old boy named Tom Riddle. Also known as Lord Voldemort to this day."

More gasps were made all around. Harry whispered his thanks to the wand maker. He asked for a talk later, to which the old man agreed with a knowing smile. Fudge got up and held his hands high.

"Order! To question a Ministry approved demonstration is absurd! We knew of these facts before hand!"

"How come then, that you told us all, for the last two hours before this presentation, that it was only a rogue terrorist attack?" yelled a hysteric parents, still in shock.

"Because it would have sent panic all across Britain like a wildfire without any real facts to back it up," explained Harry, stepping to the side of the Minister. "You had to see it by yourself to understand and realize. You know what to be wary of. Who to be wary of. Knowing your enemy is the first step to defeating it."

"Nobody can kill You-Know-Who! He came back from the dead! He's immortal!" stated another concerned parent.

"Nobody's truly immortal. This man hasn't even lived a normal man's lifetime yet. He's only so afraid of death that he's trying by all means possible to cheat it," said Dumbledore this time, coming at Harry's side.

"We'll get him, be assured of that," stated Harry with more confidence than he felt.

To the gathered crowd, a symbol appeared. They saw their Minister in charge siding with the Boy-Who-Lived, who faced the Dark Lord and came back alive, and the only wizard who Voldemort was said to fear. Seeing those three on the same side...hope rekindled.

"He's only one man, after all," said somebody, surprised by his own words judging by his tone of voice.

"Yeah! Kick Riddle's ass!" yelled somebody else.

Somewhat, Voldemort's real name made them feel he was closer to a mortal man than the feared image of a Dark Lord. The Minister decided he could not put this off any longer. He had to strike now, fast and hard, so that the people's confidence stayed his.

"Aurors! Come with me! We have much to do tonight!"

The room emptied itself of the law enforcing agents and most of the Ministry officials who knew they would not get home tonight. Most other people stayed to talk of what they just saw. Many came to shake Harry's hand before he retired, claiming sudden exhaustion. But instead of going to the Infirmary or his own dorm, he went straight for the Headmaster's office. The man was more skilled than he to escape large crowds and was already waited for him. The gargoyle simply moved to let him pass. Harry slowly made his way upstairs, getting tired for real. It was already the middle of the night.

"Harry, my boy. Sit down. You won't have to re-tell the events of tonight, of course, but take a breath before going back to the Infirmary. Pompy will have my head if I keep you up longer than necessary," said Albus, smiling. But this time, the usual twinkle was almost gone from his eyes. Harry guessed he wasn't much of a sight right now either. He took the offered seat and closed his eyes a moment. He had to gather his thoughts and ask the right questions. Even if he was tempted to simply fall asleep in his chair right now.

"Professor...Did you knew of this ritual?"

"Yes, Harry. But I never saw it performed before, or even considered it would work with a homunculus made from a spirit form fed with unicorn blood and snake's milk."

Harry made a non-committal noise. It was a bit complex to foresee, that was for sure.

"Do you know anything I should know? Or that you figure I should learn only later?" he asked tiredly, but looking at him.

Dumbledore's silence spoke volume. Harry didn't have the strength to be angry right now. If he kept it from him until now, it was probably a good thing. He trusted Dumbledore. But now, he would always go to sleep wondering how many people were killed by Voldemort and his Death Eaters that day. Trying to ease his sleep by keeping him in the dark was pointless.

"Tell me everything, professor," said Harry simply.

"Harry... you still have some time before being burdened by all of this. You did well tonight. Extraordinarily well in fact. I have never been prouder of your accomplishments than by seeing you come back alive from such an ordeal. Let me and the Prime Minister handle this for now."

Harry stayed silent a while. He had closed his eyes during Dumbledore's refusal. He opened them back and looked directly at the Headmaster. As if he never said a thing. Expectantly. Albus sighed. Why so soon?

"It's too late professor. If you trust me and want to spare me from the fear of the unknown, tell me. Voldemort himself seemed to know something about me. If I ever face him again, I'll need to be on even ground with him. I want to be prepared."

"Harry..."

"Or do I have to find it on my own? What if I leave school, do not return to my relative this summer and search for the answer myself?" asked Harry serious.

"Harry...You can't do that. You have to return to the Dursley's this summer for your protection. More so than ever. I heard it wasn't so bad last time," he asked hopefully.

"It was the best time I had there ever," Harry admitted. "But if you don't answer me, I won't go, or escape as soon as I'm there. And I'll never put my trust in you ever again."

Dumbledore massaged the sides of his head, feeling a growing headache coming. He went to the cabinet and pulled a pensive from it. Harry's eyes lit up as he tried to look at the runes carved all around it. Dumbledore could not help but chuckle. This boy would do great things.

"A pensive, isn't it?" asked Harry hungrily. "I've only saw one before in a rune book before. I'm guessing you'll show me one of your memories?"

Albus only nodded. He carefully put the magical bowl on his desk and, his eyes closed, carefully pulled a silver-looking strand from the side of his head. Harry was amazed at the physical form of the memory. It was like extracting the essence of thoughts itself! The Headmaster dropped the strand in the bowl and tapped it once with his wand. The face of Harry's ex-teacher of Divination, Sybilla Trelawney, appeared. She looked younger, but had the same oversized glasses. She spoke of fate, of the doom of a Dark Lord and of a young boy in a deep voice he never heard her use in his brief passage in Divination. Harry



stored the words away for Hermione to decipher what he might have missed.

"So..." started Harry as the Headmaster put his pensive away, "I have to kill him, or he kill me. I have something he's unaware of...that will help me kill him."

Harry went in deep thoughts, under the wary eye of Dumbledore. Was that all the reaction he got at the news he would have to kill someone?

"My dear boy...You don't have to start learning to cast the killing curse tomorrow. It never said when this would come to happen," said Dumbledore, trying to sound soothing.

"The longer I wait, the more people will suffer and die. I'll have to get ready," Harry said, biting his thumb, looking at the floor.

"You take this...awfully well..." said the Headmaster, looking at him sideways.

The Boy-Who-Lived raised his eyes to look at him, surprised.

"I kinda came to such a conclusion in the cemetery. Why would he care that much about me otherwise if I'm not a specific threat? And about that killing thing...You saw him come back as I did. He's not a dark wizard. He became a dark creature. A monster on the roam that need to be put down. I'm sure I'll have less regrets killing him than I had killing the basilisk in second year. At least, the poor beast never chose to be like that."

Dumbledore smiled proudly. Maybe was it time after all.

"Harry...what I'm about to tell you should stay in this office. At least for now."

Harry snapped to attention at once.

"There is this really, really dark technique used to make artefacts known as Horcruxes..."

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Harry went back to the Infirmary as the sun was getting up. Dumbledore ushered him away when he saw him dozing off of his chair. He assured Harry they would talk again. Harry, despite all he learned, felt okay. Dumbledore told him many secrets. He finally trusted him and saw him mature enough to handle this all. Someone was waiting for him beside his bed. Somebody he didn't expect to see that night.

"You know that this will make things hard for me now, do you?" asked Draco Malfoy, speaking in a low voice.

Harry sighed, again, and sat on his bed. Draco was sitting on a chair, leg crossed, looking down. He had no trace of his usual arrogance.

"They probably raided Malfoy Manor by now. My dad will be arrested. My mom will be hysteric. What should I do now, Potter? Everybody knows I spoke in the favour of the Dark Lord in the past. I'm a Death Eater in training for them. Even in my own dorm. Father would probably tell me how proud he is that I can finally join ranks if he would not be cowering in a cell with dementors over him. I know that I'm not nearly powerful enough to hide anything from him. No one can. He doesn't even have to use Legillimancy to know if you're lying. So what now? What do I do? I won't hide the fact that I blame you for this, Potter. And that I'm scared."

Harry had his head in his hands. By the time he spent in this pose, he found a rather comfortable position now. He understood how Dumbledore got most of his white hairs.

"It depends. You want to keep high or low profile?" asked Harry.

"What will it change?" snorted Draco, listening intently.

"High profile...You disowned your father, become Lord Malfoy and tell anyone who wants to hear you're got nothing to do with them. On the other hand, you secretly finance the Death Eaters, sending word to Voldemort that your father is fried and have no more influence on

the government. You, on the other hand, would prove to be useful in the long run as an 'unmarked' Death Eater and that contact should be kept minimal. You'll be able to dress a list of the Death Eaters remaining around Voldemort like that."

Draco eyebrows shot up as Harry explained his scenario made on the spot. There were flaws and a lot could go wrong, like Voldemort demanding him to report in person and finding all of that out, but it was the best they could do in short notice.

"And low profile would be?" he asked, dubious.

"Nothing. Act like a scared fourteen years old that his father just got thrown in jail. Show by your stalling, indecisions and hiding that you would not make good DE material," answered Harry, rubbing his face. Damn did he wanted to fall brain dead right now!

Draco looked to be in deep thoughts. Harry had no ideas of what was going on in old nemesis's head, but his eyes were already closing back. He was physically unable to stay awake anymore. He simply laid in his bed and folded the blanket he was on over him.

"Sorry, I had a hard day..." he mumbled. Just like that, he fell asleep.

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Harry didn't feel like fighting Madam Pomfrey to stay in bed the next day. He didn't feel like doing much at all. He stared at the ceiling, read some letters that he received in the morning and tried to get a glimpse of his future.

The letters were quite entertaining. He never had so much support and compliment in his life! Many saw the return of Voldemort and how he handled himself in front of him. And now they saw him as one of the two lone wizards able to defeat the Dark Bastard. No need of a prophecy to figure that now, eh, Tom? The thing was, he still had to figure out the power he had that Tommy didn't know about. He hazily remembered something the Headmaster said the day previous...Something about...love? Even Albus wasn't sure about this one.

Wow. He just thought of the Headmaster as 'Albus'. That's strange. Back to the present.

'Facing that I can't crush Voldemort to nothingness in a hug, what else does 'love' can do to help me,' Harry thought. 'Allies? Friends? He have fear that brought back his Death Eaters in instant submission to his side. And he knew about my friends already. So what? Arrange a blind date with Madam Pince to kill him from boredom?'

Harry snorted and chuckled. Right! Voldemort on a date! Like he would know what to do with a woman even with a Kamasutra book laid open in front of him! It would hurt his head just to think about it!

...

....

'Whoa. Could this be it?' mused Harry, shell shocked to what was, maybe, Voldemort's weakness. He's a dark creature on the same level as a dementor now. Those are repelled by happy thoughts. Could he be killed, or at least repelled or weakened by love? That would be something to dig in. It was all theory, but if he found a way to put it in practice, something that could be taught, people wouldn't be defenceless before Voldemort! The guy could have such a surprise the next time he goes in a killing spree himself!

But he's ahead of himself. Hey, look at that. Fleur just passed the infirmary's doors. She looked so sad. So beautiful too. It's a shame to be so cute when sad, thought Harry, still lost in his analysis mood.

"Hi Harry. I see that you're finally awake. I came by earlier but you were still sleeping," she said, taking a seat on the side of the bed.

"Yeah. I got back in here when the birds began chirping. I'm still groggy and in need of rest. But I need to think about stuff too. I'm sorry you had to see that yesterday."

"I told you, Harry. I'm not a little girl," she said softly, smiling. "I can handle the truth, as horrible as it is. His return was probably the darkest act of the decade."

"What? No! I was talking about the first seconds of the movie, when I grabbed the cup. That reminded you that you lost the Tournament and that I won. Yay for me!" said Harry, arms in the air.

Fleur was looking at him, mouth gaping. Then...

"You JERK!" she yelled, hitting his arm roughly. "I can't believe you! You just had to rub it in my face, didn't you?!"

Harry laughed, not realizing how lightly he could dismiss the dark event of the day prior. The laughter died down, giving birth to an expecting silence. The French and Bulgarian representative would leave in a few days.

"Do you think we could keep up some light correspondence or would it just be torture?" asked Harry hopefully. He was afraid of the answer.

"I don't mind, Harry. If I stop our relation, it's not that I don't like you... It's just..."

Harry wasn't looking directly at her but listened with great care.

"It's just that I feel you're too young for me, even after all we did. You affect me like a Veela affect most men! But that's not real love. The problem is that I still like you even after shoving away my lust for you. But probably not like that. But I feel I do because of that same attraction you got on me and...does that make any sense to you?" she ended up asked, clearly confused herself.

Harry's head dropped sideways. A tic he got from Luna.

"Kind of. You're afraid you're taking a friend for a lover because you want to jump on him each time you see him."

"Yeah. That pretty much covers it," she agreed, blushing.

"But what's important," stated Harry, "...is that you said I feel too young for you. Feelings are important. They are the one to listen. We're alone. I'm already in bed. Feeling any excitement building up?"

Fleur realized what he said, looked around and saw that even the nurse was away. She looked at Harry, surprised.

"No, I don't. Isn't it strange?" she said, once more confused.

"Not at all. It's all very logical in fact. I'm exhausted. I'm not...radiating for the lack of a better term, any energy at all. I'm like any other wizard right now. That attractive power you felt isn't there. You were right then. In this case, correspondence is a good idea. I don't wanna lose a good friend."

Fleur hugged him in return of those friendly words.

"You're a good guy, Harry. A nice guy. Which prove it's not only the jerks and jocks that can get the pretty girls! Rest and recover, loverboy. With any luck, we might have a nice 'goodbye' time before I leave..."

-----

The next days were not overly eventful. For which Harry was grateful. He met Ollivander and got the talk he wanted about his...new wand. He learned that by overpowering Voldemort, his wand now considered him as its master and would work at full capacity for him. The power of his spells would be unchanged since the wand had the same core as his old, even coming from the same creature! The only difference may come in the way the spell would work. The precision and subtlety. His first wand was suited for charms, but this one was better for transfiguration. At this point, Harry didn't care. He was as close a match two different wands could ever be.

Ron and Hermione were spending a lot of time together but tried their best not to leave him alone, in support of what happened. After he saw them share a meaningful look in the common room, Harry got up, figuring he could make a late visit to his greenhouse and his new pet.

"Harry?" asked Hermione, concerned. "Where are you going? Do you..."

"Relax, Hermione. I'm not depressed, feeling rejected by you two or anymore scarred for my life I already was. Okay, that's a bit of a lie, but I'm okay. Don't feel guilty for wanting to spend some time alone with Ron. I had my own episode with Fleur, if my memory serves me well."

"But you were stressed because of the task back then. It's understandable," replied Hermione.

"Yes. And now it's understandable for you two. I'm touched, really. But try to be a little more egoist, Hermione. I'm going to see how Sweetie and Hagrid are doing."

"Sweetie..." mumbled Ron. "You must have had a 'Hagrid streak' going on when you called a Hungarian horntail that!"

Harry grinned and went outside. It was mid-June and the weather was warm. The sun was setting. The grounds looked great. Nobody would have guessed the events that occurred just by looking around. Nothing seemed to have changed.

"Harry! M'boy! How are ya doing! You know it's dangerous out here, alone! Where are Ron and Hermione?"

"They are taking some 'alone time' on my recommendation, I hope. They can be quite overprotective friends sometimes. Can't blame them with all that happen around me, really. But for once, they were not dragged in it. I'm glad of that, at least. I figure that if I can steal Voldemort's wand and get away with it, not many people are going to try to get to me unless they outclass me ten to one."

Hagrid looked at him disapprovingly, as if he thought that Harry was making things up. Of course, he heard the rumours about Harry's new wands but...Now he couldn't doubt them. Not when that wand was pointed right under his nose. How did he do that? He didn't even see his arm move!

"I saw that look Hagrid. I didn't like it at all. You know me better than that. You know I don't brag."

Harry put his wand away, and took a decision.

"You just helped me realize something, Hagrid. Not nearly enough people saw the return of Voldemort. There is not much time left before the end of the year. I guess I'll have to hurry. In the meantime, where's my dragon, Hagrid? Isn't Sweetie usually sleeping here?"

Hagrid got over the shock of Harry's words and wand enough to answer him.

"She...went in the forest. I guess she doesn't like her food to be handed to her all the time. But I'm worried. What if she stumbles on the centaurs? Or worst?"

Harry nodded, made a 'point me' charm and took the direction of the forest.

"Where...wait! I'll get my crossbow and come with you!" Hagrid said, turning to his hut.

"Why...dammit... everybody think I'm useless. HAGRID! Don't bother! I'm going after her myself! I'm her master. I'll make sure she remembers it."

Leaving a stunned Hagrid, Harry walked passed the forest edge without as much as a look behind. The place looked exactly like the last time he visited. Twisted trees and mangling roots. Silence of death punctured by noises of beasts you don't wanna know about.

But that changed a bit. Harry wanted to know what lurked in here! He was cured of the most common weakness: fear. Harry saw the most feared man get a body back in a show of flesh, blood and bones. He confronted that dark creature. He tamed a dragon. Of course, he could still get afraid. But he'd have to face a boggart sometime soon to find out what could scare him. Harry saw the biggest rat ever cross his path, not looking at him. Harry didn't bother. He did spare a



glance at a unicorn eating grass. It wasn't only the worst that could live in here.

Then, the unicorn lifted its head and ran the hell away. A second later, a roar was heard in the opposite direction the majestic animal took. Harry simply followed the roar, recognizing it. Harry got on the scene Hagrid feared. Sweetie was surrounded by two dozens centaurs, many handling bows as tall as he was. Harry didn't want to experiment if those could pierce a dragon's hide. Sweetie was about to 'breathe' her way out but Harry did not wish to upset the centaur population either.

"DOWN girl!" he yelled, walking in the circle of horse-man without hesitations.

Having their attention on a bigger threat, the centaur didn't notice his arrival until that moment. They had no choice now, as they saw the monstrous beast get down flat on its belly, the head on the ground, almost whining. Harry went to her snout and hit her lightly with one finger.

"NO attacking the centaurs, understood? No!"

The beast let out a noise that could be considered an acknowledgment. Maybe dragons don't have a human brain, but it was brighter than a dog and could understand some commands. 'No' seemed to be one of them. Harry turned toward the dumbstruck and downright gaping crowd.

"I'm sorry if Sweetie caused any trouble. I'll make sure it never happens ever again. I hope she haven't done any lasting damages."

A centaur in the first line smiled and was about to answer when another beat him to it.

"HUMAN! How DARE you unleash your... monster in OUR forest! You have no rights to come here in first place! We should kill you where you stand!"

Sweetie sensed hostility and began growling. Harry didn't do a thing to stop her.

"Bane," said the first centaur that was about to talk. "You should not be hostile to this young wizard, and his tamed dragon. He stopped it from attacking us and offered apologies."

"Quit it with your human loving speeches, Firenze! We can take them out without lowering ourselves to ask for mercy!"

"And why would you do that when friendship is still an option?" asked Harry, casually walking up to the friendly centaur. "You speak with wisdom, Firenze."

"You seem to be wiser than most humans, Harry Potter," replied the centaur, smiling and shaking the hand Harry presented.

"Blood traitor! How dare you Firenze!" yelled Bane. Most other centaurs were watching the debate with interest. Harry quickly understood how the centaur hierarchy went. The boss was the one acting the most like the boss. Quite a human trait. Firenze was the calm and charismatic leader. Bane was the proud and fearless warrior. Bane had an edge. He could not let that happen. If he could wedge the hierarchy to his advantage...It would prevent further problems in the forest.

"Bane, is it? Accio scythe!" Harry said loudly, wiping out his wand.

"Scum! I knew we couldn't trust you! KILL HIM!"

"I'm not threatening anyone else than YOU, Bane. In fact, I'm challenging you. Fight me. If I win, you SHUT THE FUCK UP and LEAVE! If you win, I guess you can kill me."

A golden flash appeared and Harry grabbed the small tool, now turned weapon, that was racing toward him. Firenze looked at him, alarmed.

"Fight you?" asked Bane, now wary. "Do you think I'm stupid? You'll use your cursed magic on me!" said Bane, taking a step back, looking

around. The crowd was simply watching. If this was a duel, it was Bane's business.

Harry took a rock and transfigured it in a simple, thin, round shield. He used his wand and hastily carved a few runes in it. He pocketed his wand and activated the runes, running a finger over it. The runes were not his best work, by far, but they would harden his shield against anything that this fool would throw at him. It would nullify any force put upon it too, so he wouldn't be thrown back when Bane would charge him. Now, it was Harry's job to manage to actually block things with it. The thought that he might be a little bit crazy and still affected by a boosted ego from having stalled Voldemort in a duel crossed his mind. He dismissed it. He could not afford to hesitate right now.

"Well, my wand is away now. Do you have any other excuses to avoid facing a fourteen years old boy?"

The centaur rushed at him. Harry grinned. In a way, he had already won. Bane showed weakness by attacking only when his adversary was looking to be at a clear disadvantage. Looking, mind you. Bane was charging, a long spear ahead, clearly intending to run through his shield and him. Though luck. Harry braced his foot in the ground and held the shield before him. Bane had a strong grip on his spear, which simply stopped on Harry's shield. He twisted sideways, as if he just charged a wall. 'That must have hurt his arm...' Harry figured.

Harry ran to Bane, having no intention of letting his advantage get away. He didn't want the centaurs to think he was taking them lightly either. Harry, his shield ready to come up if need be, raised his small scythe with the clear intention to strike at the open side. Bane presented his spear up defensively, attempting to relieve Harry of his weapon in the same time. Unfortunately, his spear was no match for Harry's rune'd small scythe. It cut it neatly in two, digging in the flesh of the beast easily. Bane stepped back but was losing balance fast as he held his bleeding side.

Harry was remorseful. He hurt him. Even if Bane wanted to kill him, he felt bad. The centaur wasn't a monster. Just thick headed. But he couldn't avoid the blood to be shed. He just didn't like it at all. He

sprinted toward Bane and rammed his shield in his left front leg. Then he simply targeted higher and pushed. The shield simply neutralized the force Bane pushed back on it. He finally fell to the ground, on his side. Harry walked up to his head before he could get up and put his scythe near his neck.

"You will live, Bane. Do not worry. You will live with the shame of having been beaten by a fourteen years old human. Or the pride of having battled the one Voldemort fears the most now. Your choice. But either way, because of your actions, you will have to leave this place, in silence."

Harry turned his back on him, and, panting, went back to Firenze. Sweetie was up again and about to rush on Bane.

"Down, girl. It's over," said Harry casually. His pet confirmed his suspicion to be able to understand him by slowly laying back down, with her head's up, following him.

"A gift to the centaur's leader," said Harry, giving his shield to Firenze. "It's not much, and I don't know if it'll last as it is transfiguration work. But it's all I have under hand right now."

Firenze chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not..."

"You are to me," quickly said Harry, not wanting the centaur's humility to work against him. "If you tell me to leave this forest, I will. I'll respect your decision. But I would rather like to be on friendly term with you."

"Then friendly it will be, Harry Potter! Now, could you tell us the reason of your presence in these woods? The stars did tell us of an alliance with a bright star on the light side, but not that she would come to see us."

"As mystical as it sound", said Harry, amused, "my pet felt like a late snack was in order."

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Harry was pondering about the meeting with the centaurs, lying on his back between Sweetie's wings. The sensation of flying with his eyes closed was so relaxing...He figured he would have to tell the Headmaster that the centaur's population was on their side now. At least, on his. He just secured Firenze position amongst his own people. That didn't mean they would tolerate humans roaming freely in their forest. But they wouldn't kill on sight. Except if they were Death Eaters. That was a plus. Harry would have to seek advice from Firenze now and then. His divination abilities coupled with his wisdom would be priceless.

He was hoping to find something for Sweetie to munch fast since it was getting late and he didn't put it under Hagrid to organize a search party. Seeing the increasing number of spider webs, Harry guessed exactly where they were. Sweetie didn't like the sticky traps and sent short burst of flames, melting them out of her way. Five seconds later, a flurry of eight-legged monsters were swarming around. Harry slid down from Sweetie's back and let her fight as she liked.

He used the spider repelling charm in its original form to push back the smaller ones and the destructive version for the big ones. Sweetie seemed to have loads of fun. Especially biting into them.

"Sweetie! Try fryin' them!" suggested Harry on a whim.

The dragon did at once and the sickly scent seemed to appeal to her. She began eating the smoking victims. Harry recognized her grunt as happy ones. The flow of spider died down as they simply looked from afar at their fallen comrade being eaten. Harry was glad they fell back. He could not say he wasn't tired of the earlier fight with Bane, as brief as it was.

"I recognize you...you are... Hagrid's friend..."

Harry turned toward the new voice.

"Well, if it's not good old Aragog! Hi there! As white as ever!" said Harry, walking in front of it.

Seeing her master take charge, Sweetie looked out for any threatening moves from this big spider. She would find none as the Acromantula had a hard time simply walking, or crawling, to get there.

"Have you brought...war on me? I thought you were Hagrid's friend and would hold no hostility toward me..." the giant arachnid said.

"Of course! I'm Hagrid's friend. I'm giving you the same courtesy you gave me, two years ago. Neither I nor my dragon will attack you. You are Hagrid's friend. Unfortunately, this does not expand to those other spiders there. They are strangers. And my dragon's hungry. I won't stop it from eating them if they venture too close to her. You should go, now, Aragog. I'll let you live, for Hagrid's sake."

The spider looked a long time at Harry. He saw the mistake he did two years ago. How could he guess Harry would become so powerful? He turned away, making his way back to his hole. He made some noises along the way and all the spiders still alive disappeared from sights. Sweetie got back to her lunch, munching noisily. Harry mused out loud: "One friend and one foe in one evening. I guess it even itself out."

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Harry was scolded by professor McGonagall when he got back in the castle but since the House cup system wasn't in place this year, she threaten him of detention if he ever tried such dangerous behaviour again. Harry nodded in understanding, surprised he didn't get detention this time, and got back to his common room to be sure not to upset her anymore. He told what happened that evening to Ron and Hermione who were waiting for him. Harry skipped the combat sequence with Bane, simply saying that he went away. He skipped his talk with Aragog too, only stating that Sweetie liked crunchy spider legs. Ron seemed to be sick and happy at the same time.

"Can't have a dull day, Harry?" mused Ron out loud.

"Nope. And the next won't be either. I'll need your help. Tomorrow, for the last week of the term, we'll give Hogwarts students something they're not ready to forget."

Harry finally got back to his busy self. He had mere days to wrap up his experiments, to decide which one he could take with him for the summer, prepare the greenhouse to be self-sufficient during the summer and make as many representations as possible of his fight with Voldemort in his 'Project Room'. He tried to avoid Fleur to stay focussed but she always seemed to be able to corner him right after the lights got down after the start of a representation. He guessed his own magical batteries must be recharged!

Harry choose well the people he proposed to see the 'movie'. Most teachers saw it, but many wanted to see it again. The bravest and oldest students went next. Then the curious. Then the one not wanting to be left in the dark of what the other 'cool kids' were talking about. They avoided showing it to the first and second years students though. It would have been a little too much for them. Everybody knew now. Everyone saw it. They would tell their parents.

The final day came and Harry found himself back in the Hogwarts Express. As usual, Malfoy made his visit. The last time, it seemed more of a habit then pure blind hate. This time, he opened the door and let Crabbe and Goyle outside after telling them to stand guard. He kept silent a moment, simply looking at Harry. Ron was frowning and Hermione looked afraid a duel would break out.

"I'm in, Potter."

Draco turned back, opened the door and stepped out. He turned sideways and said, his voice dripping with venom: "You better remember it."

He closed the door and left with his goons.

"What was that about?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing much. We now have a double agent working on our side," explained Harry, grinning from ear to ear.

"How do you know he's working for us?" asked Ron, suspicious.

Harry looked up and finally understood what Albus felt toward Snape.

"I trust him. That's how."

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The end of the train travel was a quiet affair. The twins came as joyful as ever, thanking Harry for his performances in the Tournament. They were taking bet on him from the First Task. The rate being what they were, they made enough to finance half of their own joke shop! Harry took them apart and proposed to be part of their small business if he gave them what was missing. They smiled and told him he was already a partner, but that they'd take it as a 'low-interest loan' that would be paid back as soon as they would make some benefits. Hands were shaken and Galleons changed pockets. Harry was sure to have done a good deal. He still had half of the tournament prize after all. He'd have to find some time to go to Gringott this summer.

Vernon was quietly waiting for him outside the station and did his best putting on a forced smile.

"How was... school... my boy?" he asked, almost sweating from the intense efforts such civility toward a 'freak' asked of him.

"It was fun. A lot happened. I have so many things to tell you..." trailed Harry.

Vernon was stiffer than a board all the way back. They got out of the car, Harry sporting a zen smile and waving slowly to the neighbours. He would keep his 'brainwashed profile' while he's here if it pleased his uncle. Once inside, he didn't even have the time to move his trunk up in his room that his uncle rounded on him.

"Events? Things to tell me? What kind of events could possibly affect us?!" asked Vernon, his face gaining more colours.

Harry couldn't find the strength or will to suppress a sigh. Things would go down from there.



"Remember how my parents were found dead in a blown house?" he asked painfully.

"The worst day of my existence, boy, since it got you here," Vernon grumbled back.

Hopefully, Harry was past dotting on his hate about him.

"The murderer came back."

Petunia realized what this news meant more than her husband. She put a hand on her heart, shocked, and slowly sat down.

"Came back? He was dead! They said they didn't even...find a body..." finished Vernon slowly, getting to the right conclusion with a wrong pattern of thoughts.

"He was, in a way," tried to explain Harry. "He's more of a dark creature than a human now. I saw him come back. It was horrible. I managed to escape. Thanks to the protections left on me by my mother, we're all safe here and can live normally in this house. The thing is, I think that the protections will leave when I'll turn seventeen. Two whole years. If I manage to defeat him in that laps of time, you should never be affected by all of this. If I don't....you'll probably have to go in hiding."

"HIDING? Like FUGITIVE?" roared Vernon. "Nobody's going to make me leave MY house!"

Harry thought wise not to remind him that they managed to make him leave his house when faced to the Wizarding mail...

"And you should not have to. I have to work, this summer, in the garage during daytime. Nobody's there usually after you leave for work until you come back. I'll need to use the space to work, quietly. I won't neglect any of my chores. I simply need peace and quiet."

"You think I will allow...under my roof..." began Vernon, shaking.

Harry sighed again. He had his anger building up. The volcano was about to blow.

"So, if I get you right, you rather let a terrorist rule Britain? He have nobility on his side and is for the cleansing of humanity. To him, all non-magically born wizards should be killed and ordinary folks, like you, should become disposable slaves."

Vernon breath caught in his mouth.

"He's the Wizarding version of Hitler. Now, you have the power to help stop him. You just have to let me do what I have to do. I already have contacts in our government..."

"You have a GOVERNMENT??" shouted Vernon, revolted.

This was taking so much time. Harry's patience grew thin.

"Yes, we do. And I know personally the Prime Minister of Magic..."

"Stop using that WORD!!" stomped Vernon.

Harry had enough. This guy was like a little kid who refused to admit that the Easter Bunny was only a commercial figure. He was rejecting all he didn't understand. Too bad. He would have to keep things simple.

"Vernon, do you recognize what this is?" asked Harry, getting out his wand, making sure it wasn't in front of any windows.

"Put that THING..." growled Vernon, walking toward Harry, a finger raised.

Harry already had enough. He cast a repelling charm, sending Vernon roughly on the sofa. The man looked at him wide eyes, shaking.

"You....you can't. Your school...You'll be expelled," he stuttered.

"Not anymore. See, the only thing allowing them to trace my magic was a tracker in my wand. This isn't my wand. It's Voldemort's. I stole it from him as we fought after his return. You understand what it means? I wanted to give you a chance to freely accept my conditions instead of being forced into them. I find this unfair for you as much as for me that we are to be forced to live together. I really tried to ease this but you are so stubborn! So, now, I'll be telling you instead of asking you. I'll be using the garage. Give me any trouble and you can be sure that I'll reveal my exact nature to the neighbourhood. Not only that, I'll make them believe you're wizard too."

Harry took his trunk and pulled it in the garage. He was as well to prepare for some late work. He'd place his stuff and take care of the garden. With any luck, it's going to be perceived as a sign of good will.

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Another year, another lawn. Yep.

## Author Note:

I just read all the comment about my fanfic on DarkLordPotter. I haven't been that pissed in a while. It shows how much anyone can post anything, pretty much like fanfiction itself. Some of them, despite treating my story like a rag, kept decent by shutting down the story, not the author and for that, I salute you, and apologize if my work isn't up to your standard. I'll try to correct the loooooooooooooong words thing too. For the other that tried to get a picture of me by their subjective view of my story, let me tell you that you are all complete moron imbued by the small critic power you think you have while you are, in fact, making total jerks of yourself.

You don't like Harry who can rationalize? You rather like the stupid hero J.K imposed on us? You like to bash on the red heads? You can't admit that in anyone can sleep a genius in a specific domain and that it won't show unless you begin actually working on it? I won't tell you to stop reading my story. STOP READING FANFIC AT ALL. This is made for enjoyment. If you can't enjoy it and can't stop bitching about it, then just stop and let the people here to have fun alone. I'll keep being a righteous prick too by asking not to insult people who dare leave good reviews even if it differ from your own taste.

I'm truly sorry for anyone here not concerned who have to read this. I like my reviewer here, on ffdotnet, who are more inclined to keep you going on while pointing out a few adjustments than those self proclaimed Harry Potter art critics.

P.S many thanks to my new Beta, stevejobsfan!

Disclaimer: Not mine.

Harry's first week was as he imagined. Busy. He left the high window of the garage open, easing the owls' passage. He sent some of his own to Sirius, to the Ministry, to Ron and Hermione, as well as to the Goblins. The episode with the centaurs showed him he wouldn't always be able to use his wand. He was no warrior. He'd won against Bane because the centaur had underestimated him. Because he made a shield designed to defeat him. He was untrained. He'd need

an awesome weapon to compensate. That must be the hidden motive behind the 'kindness' of the Goblins, and their offer of metal samples. He would need to design something. The problem was: he lacked the intellectual stimulation he had at Hogwarts. That school was like a medieval castle, with suit of armor at each turn. He was back at the cleanest place on Earth, where knives are kept dull so you don't cut yourself. Okay, that was a bit much but it wasn't far off.

He needed inspiration. Brainstorming sessions with Luna were where he got some of his craziest and most effective ideas. The Second Task, with the Golden Egg, showed him that. He decided to write to her as well, asking her if she wanted to come now and then to work on a 'summer project'.

Meanwhile, the Dursleys were ignoring his very existence when he was anywhere in the house. Around the house, they were quick to compliment his gardening work and then to go about their business.

Two days after he sent the letter to Luna, the doorbell rang during breakfast. Harry had just finished serving everyone's food so he went to the door. The sight beyond it made him smile instantly.

"Luna! It's so good to see you! Come on in!"

Luna smiled brightly at him and stepped in, brushing at wrinkles on her cute white carrot patterned summer dress.

"I hope I'm not too early, Harry. Your letter had me so excited that I simply came as soon as I could to learn about your new project and..."

She trailed off, looking a little to the side.

"Thank you," she resumed shyly. "Thanks for thinking of me as reliable and to ask me to come over your home during summer. It never happened before..." she finished, blushing.

Harry noticed just how good she really looked. Her long light blond hair...Her curves so gentle in that cute summer dress...STOP! He told himself. You're not supposed to ogle your partner!

...

Damn. Too late. Oh well. She would make an attractive sight in the dreary garage during their brainstorming sessions.

"Who is it, boy? A cookie seller or..." asked Vernon, curious about Harry not bringing the guest to them.

"Uncle Vernon, this is Luna Lovegood. One of my most brilliant classmates. Probably in the top five of the school. She came over to help me with my...work," Harry said, stepping to the side to show Luna properly. In the same motion, his wand mysteriously appeared in his hand opposite to Luna, hiding it from sight except for Vernon.

"How...nice...You should have warned us of her coming here before hand... my boy. We would have...welcomed her properly," the big man said, visibly straining, his eyes going from Luna to Harry's wand. And the very hard tone in Harry's eyes.

"She came by as a surprise! It might happen again in the summer. I hope it doesn't bother you too much," Harry continued, sounding sincere. A feeling that, once again, didn't seem to reach his eyes.

"Of course...not, dear nephew. But try to stay in the garage, if possible," Vernon managed to say.

"Of course uncle, except for the gardening chores. It's such a beautiful summer." Harry said sweetly.

"Of course..."

And just like that, with barely a nod to their guest, Vernon stomped away, climbed in his car and went to work. Harry guessed Vernon would be working overtime tonight.

"Have you had breakfast, Luna?" asked Harry politely.

"Yes, in the Knight Bus. Thank you. Why the garage?" she inquired.

Harry led her there, closing and locking the door. He opened the high window and went to the back, to something hidden by a wide blanket.

"I figured it had more space than my room for a workshop. The cement floor is less flammable, too."

Harry took his wand and conjured two wooden chairs.

"Harry!" Luna said, panicking.

"What? Oh! That! Don't worry. Remember? It's Tom Riddle's wand. No trackers!"

"Isn't it possible that he put some of his own in it?" Luna asked.

Harry realized with a touch of fear that he hadn't thought of that.

"Good point. But I've been using it for almost a week now. Either the wards stop it or there are no trackers. Seeing how ready he was to face me, I doubt he would have waited this long."

"Unless he's planning on destroying your safe house while you're at Hogwarts," Luna shot back.

Damn he had missed that girl! Her reasoning was off the chart!

"Even so. Tom thinks he's untouchable. He wouldn't believe that anyone could steal his wand."

"I hope you're right, Harry. What's this project you were talking about?" she asked, getting on the subject that they were both aching to get too.

"I have to discover the Death Eaters's and Voldemort's worst fears. I need to find a way to exploit those fears to fight them. I have to design a weapon for the Goblins to make that would allow me to confront them with little training, and without a wand. I need to design a shield to help me in that regard too. Finally, I need to design a spell. One that anyone can cast, without much training. A spell that would hurt Voldemort badly."

Luna stared at him, unblinking. Then she did. Twice.

"Are all your summers this busy, Harry?"

"Only these last two. This is why I need you to help. I only have to water the garden today. Let's get some fresh air before confining ourselves to the garage."

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They each had a pad and a pencil. Luna found really useful not to have to dip the pen in an inker each time before writing.

"Dementors?" asked Luna.

"Everyone is kinda afraid of them. Hell, I faint in their presence without a Patronus."

"I heard they are trying to recruit them. You know... Keep your enemy close..."

"I guess. I wonder if that means they fear the giants too?" Harry asked idly.

"In some regards, yes. But I think Tom intends to use them as pure overpowering canon fodder." Luna said, munching on the end of her pencil by habit.

"That's for sure. They don't fear the law or the consequence of their actions. They don't care much what happen to their children. The only damn thing the Death Eaters fear is Voldemort himself!"

"Vol...de...mort...Death...Eaters," said Luna slowly. "So many things about death. They fear it more than anything else. To depart from this life. The DE fear to be killed by Voldemort while he simply fears death."

"Aren't we all wary of the afterlife, to some extent?" asked Harry slowly, feeling they were onto something.



"Yes and no. In their case, it's not the afterlife. It is death itself. The very moment of their passing. Will it be violent? Painful? It is the journey, not the destination. If they saw the personification of their death, it would shake their very core and attack their superstitious side."

"The Grim Reaper," mumbled Harry. "I have to become the Grim Reaper to them, without them knowing it's me."

"I know it might look strange..." began Luna, surprising Harry in her choice of words, "but that would mean you would have to kill, in front of witnesses even, sometimes. That's the way the rumours would spread and the only way for the terror effect to counter Voldemort's one. Can you kill? You realize that you're going to become some kind of masked outlaw?"

Harry dropped his head, letting the silence stretch. Luna wasn't going to drop the matter though.

"Yes, I will. It's morally wrong, I know. To execute without a trial. To kill instead of detaining. No chances of redemption. It's just... they already killed so many! They will again, of their own free will. I only intend to kill the irrecoverable. It might give something for the other to think about. I will probably have to...kill McNair, who seem to enjoy his job a bit too much as an executioner. Bellatrix LeStrange too, from what Sirius told me."

"And then who?" pushed Luna.

"I...I-I really don't know. I'll have to talk to Draco, to view court records of the last war. It's not going to be easy. I'll have to interrogate them, I guess. With veritaserum. I...I don't know what else...how to be sure..."

Luna looked at his slumped form on his chair, his notebook and pen on the side. She got up, walked up to him and took him in a gentle embrace.

"I care about you Harry. I don't want to lose you. You're doing the right thing, for the right reasons. Just don't lose yourself in this."

Harry circled her in his arm, pressing her against him. His eyes felt moist. More from the support he had than thinking of the task ahead of him.

"You'll be my anchor, Luna. I trust you to beat me up if I ever wander off the right track."

"I can. But it'll be easier if I do this first."

She pulled back a little, only to sit on his lap and kiss him deeply. Harry wasn't even surprised. It's as if he had just been waiting for it to happen. He lightly put his hands on her waist, easing her even closer. They pulled back eventually, both feeling better.

"I've been itching to do that since that smile I saw on your face when you opened the door," she said, looking less dreamy than usual.

"I'm ten seconds behind you then," answered back Harry. "It crossed my mind when I saw your blushing self in the entrance, in that cute dress of yours."

"Ten seconds? Guys are so slow on the uptake...I guess I'll have to put up with it," she replied, sighing dramatically.

They shared a laugh, enjoying the feeling and letting it wash away the still lingering dark thoughts. Then, Luna put a hand over her mouth.

"Oh my! I totally forgot about you and Fleur! You were still together when the term ended, weren't you?" she asked, looking truly afraid.

"Don't worry. We're no more than friends now. It seems we were always that, except that she says I have a 'Veela effect' on her. Something about powerful wizards," he said dismissively. "We'll keep light correspondence."

"Aren't you...sad?" she asked, worried.

"We knew for a while that we'd break up at the end of term so I pretty much got over it. We felt it was for the best," Harry explained, feeling it was right. He absently began tracing a finger on her back, remembering how Fleur liked it herself. He discovered that light touches were probably liked by girls in general, Veela or not. Luna looked like she would have purred if she could. Harry kept the moment a while, relaxing.

"Not that I want to ruin this particularly pleasant moment, but we still have work to do," Harry said.

Luna simply lay still against him, letting his finger run chastely all over her body. The shivers he could send just by tracing a finger behind her leg were crazy!

"Hummmm. This is more relaxing. Death talks and plans tomorrow. You can use your wand. Just transfigure a second bed in your room."

Despite his building anxiousness, Harry simply chuckled. 'Okay', he mused. 'I could use a break anyway.'

They eventually got up, much to Luna's chagrin, but to Harry's leg muscles' pleasure. They put the garage back in order, not that they had gotten anything out. They went out for a walk, ending in the park near Privet drive, sitting on swings. They ate hot-dogs from a nearby stand, bathing in the rays of the sun during the late afternoon. Their break ended as four boys came up the street, laughing and pushing each other.

"It's Dudley and his gang," said Harry, wary. "If they'd just pass by, I'll be surprised."

"They sound about as pleasant as your uncle. Only I bet they are more...forward..." she mused.

"Right on one. Bullies to the bone. But...they're still teenagers...hum. That could work," said Harry, more to himself, eyes taking a malicious edge.

"I learned from the years I've spent around you to fear and enjoy that glint in your eyes. I remember the third year of hell of Draco Malfoy. I expect you want me to stay out of this?"

"Please," said Harry, his face taking back his freshly brainwashed traits.

"And here's Harry Potty! We couldn't help but to notice you sitting here with this gorgeous chick!" smirked a ratty looking boy, wiggling eyebrows in a poor attempt of charm.

Luna just kept silent, gazing at nothing. She was supposed to be from the same school after all. Dudley stood a little towards the back, sweating bullets. He remembered how fast Harry could be with his stick. But what could he do to get his friends to leave without looking like a coward? The gang proposed to push Harry around a little like in the 'good old times'. Harry was simply looking up at the ratty bully, his face lit by a wide sunny smile.

"Hi, Davy. It's good to see you, my friend. It's been so long. How are you doing?" Harry asked sweetly.

Luna was struggling not to burst laughing. Harry had perfected the dummy talking in a zen way to an art! It stopped the poor rodent kid short. That wasn't what he expected at all. Chuck, the second biggest bully of the band, rounded on him, his heavy frame shadowing Harry's slender ones quite easily.

"What are you, an idiot? We used to beat you up! Believe me, going to another school won't save you forever! We'll get back on lost time starting now," he said, cracking his knuckles.

"So much anger. Are you sad?" asked Harry, not losing his smile but with obvious pity now. "You need a hug. You don't need to be alone if you're afraid and confused."

Harry got up from his swing and did just that to the fourteen year old brute. The guy stiffened like a board.

"Don't worry. You're not alone. We all love you. I love you," said Harry, snuggling against the boy.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRG! Let go of me!" yelled the poor frightened teen. "You...you're gay! Stay the hell away from me!"

Chuck turned around and walked away, almost breaking into a run. Harry looked at Dudley and his two other sidekicks, looking like a lost puppy that has been kicked.

"A hug?" he asked, pleading, arms raised to do so.

They didn't wait for him to execute his threat. They joined the already distant Chuck, running fast.

"You're crazy," stated Dudley, shivering.

Harry was grinning from ear to ear now but a low rumble from the sky froze that smile in ice. Rain began to fall. Harry began shivering. The rain... was hot and cold in the same time. It was getting colder. Turning into hail. The hell? In the middle of summer?

"Mom...don't..." whispered Luna.

Harry slowly turned toward her, then instantly looked up to the sky. The clouds were not the only thing obscuring it.

"QUICK! Run! Get up Luna! Come ON! Dudley, if you care about your soul, follow me!" yelled Harry.

They ran up the dirt road going around the park, Harry's eyes searched for a shelter. Nothing could protect from the dementors, but perhaps it could at least hinder them. The soccer field was up just a dozen meters away. Harry guessed they wouldn't find better in such a rush. He steered Luna and Dudley into one of the player's shelter and ordered them to stay there. Luna's face had tears running freely now. Harry wanted to wipe them and comfort her but time was of the essence. The dark creatures were edging closer, landing on the field and approaching by hundreds.

"What is this? Harry, what's happening?! What's on the field? There is SOMETHING there, I KNOW it!" screamed Harry's cousin, panicked. He wanted to accuse Harry of being the source of it, but the guy was running with them and didn't seem to enjoy the situation anymore than him. Dudley never felt so bad in his life.

"They're called Dementors, Dudley. They're here to eat our souls."

"Our souls?" squeaked the poor muggle.

"Not if I can stop it," Harry finished, shoulder slumping, head bowed, eyes closed. He pushed the invading dark thoughts and fished in his mind for a happy thought, something powerful enough. He found one, a fresh one. Luna, sitting on his lap, kissing him, promising to watch over him. The kiss was so pure, he could not dare to yell the spell, not wanting to disturb the memory warming him up from the inside. He whispered, wand raised on a relaxed arm and wrist: "Expecto Patronum".

The stag flowed from the wand as if he was just waiting behind the curtain of dimensions to be called. It was so bright, it could have replaced the moon on a dark night. Luna, feeling the darkness pushed back as if it had never been, opened her eyes and looked up at the shining creature. Her eyes kept on crying, but from amazement at this magnificent creature shimmering against such a black background. Dudley laboured breathing returned to normal, relaxing. All he saw was his cousin bathing in the purest of light.

Harry pointed the dementors. The stag walked over to them. His aura grew with each step he took, forcing the creatures back. They howled, trying to break the holy barrier only to crush themselves again against this tangible manifestation of light. They assaulted the shield all at the same time, trying to extinguish it by covering it totally, sucking it up, their undead mouths wide open. Harry's memory couldn't be crushed by that. But he did feel the barrier strain to near breaking point. He understood that it would break if they were to totally cover it. The shield protecting them was about thirty meter in radius, so it would take all of them, but there was a chance. He closed his eyes again and focused more on his memory, focussing on the hope he felt at that moment. His heart jumped in his chest and beat stronger once,

so hard that the patronus aura flared like a nova, knocking the weakened dementors flying for miles.

The shield slowly went down, the threat gone. The stag, as strong as ever, simply walked back to him, letting Harry pet him twice before vanishing. Harry looked up at the sky, watching the clouds pulling back, the dementors no longer attracting them. The sun was slowly setting. Harry thanked silently his parents for their sacrifice, allowing him to feel something so strong it could sweep a few hundred dementors away.

Harry turned toward his cousin and his girlfriend and made a step back. They were both looking at him, open mouthed, with an expression of pure amazement and...admiration? From Dudley???

"Dude...That was awesome," the bully boy said, shaking his head slowly.

He sharply turned toward Luna, talking fast.

"What are they exactly? What do they look like? You're a... a..."

"Yes," she answered slowly, taking her time to collect herself. "I am. They look somewhat like your version of the Grim Reaper, without the weapon. Bony hands, black cloak, able to fly, dropping the temperature under zero by their simple presence, driving away all good thoughts and feeding from your despair. Then, they kiss you and eat your soul. They are indestructible. The only thing able to drive them away is the Patronus charm, which Harry did. It's like an animal representation of a strong, happy thought. His was in a corporal form, the strongest kind."

"Corporal?" asked Dudley, clearly confused.

"A stag. His looked like a stag...for us wizards. So strong you can actually touch it. But even then, one is usually able to repel...what?... Five? Eight dementors?"

"And...how many were there?" asked Dudley, leaning forward. He would finally know how strong Harry was amongst his own people.

"His stag...didn't even charge the dementors. He just stood there, his very presence radiating an aura they couldn't pass. It held what must have been the majority of the dementor population in Britain. At least four hundred. Then, he swept them away."

Dudley let out the breath he was holding. He looked at Harry with reverence.

"I though...like dad always said...that you were a freak of nature. Something evil. Dark and...clammy. Dealing with demons, flying on brooms and kidnapping normal folks to do...stuff... to them. But these...mentors..."

"Dementors," corrected Luna distractively.

"Yeah. That was evil. True evil. Demons. I felt it all the way to my bones. That light felt so...okay, call me gay but that was pure light!"

Harry smiled and chuckled. His knees chose that moment to buckle under him.

"Oops!" he said, falling on his hands, panting a little.

"What?! What happened?" asked Dudley, at his side in an instant, helping him up. Getting so close to a fate worst than death really opened his eyes. And mind.

"Errrr...Exhaustion," mumbled Harry, feeling stupid. "That spell took quite some energy and left me weak."

"And dad said you were lazy because magic did it all for you, never costing you anything since you took your energy directly from hell," mumbled Dudley, shaking his head.

"He's got us all figured out, does he?" asked Harry, sarcastically, letting Dudley help him walk.

"You have no idea!" replied Dudley, laughing.



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Vernon looked at the scene strangely. When seeing his Dudders help the freak up the stairs, claiming he protected him from something 'scary', Vernon feared the boy had brainwashed his son. He was relieved to hear Dudley close the freak's door and yell: "You stay there, freak!" He was so relieved that he never noticed that the girl from earlier followed them all the way up and was now in Harry's room.

"Your cousin played his role well," said Luna on a neutral tone.

"Yeah. Years of practice. I figured he wouldn't want his father to think he went over to the dark side," Harry replied, chuckling.

Looking at Luna's blank stare, he promised himself he would make her watch the entire Star Wars series even if he had to loan the whole movie theatre. Which wasn't such a bad idea...But not now.

Harry cast a privacy charm, cutting the sounds coming from the room and locking the door. Luna taught it to him last year to secure the Project Room in their absence. Harry pulled a broken desk to the side of the room and changed it in a small four-poster bed. It was easier to change it into a form he already knew by heart.

"Sorry, Luna. You'll have to sleep in Gryffindor colours tonight!" he said, pointing with his thumb the red and gold blankets and curtains.

"It's already thoughtful to think of my privacy. I think I'll manage," she answered, pulling on the curtains. "Could you lend me your wand a second?" she asked from behind them. Harry obliged, and went to a rudimentary formation of stones and bricks. He took some powder from a pot near it and threw it in its middle, activating flames.

"When you're ready, I'll have a fire going if you want to make a call to your father," he said, raising his voice a little.

"You have a fireplace in your room?" asked Luna, appearing in pj's at his side. It was still early, but she must have figured they would not leave the room until the next morning.

"Only for communication and passing small objects. No travel possible. Too dangerous. I pulled a few favours from the Minister. He wanted for us to look like we're working together. He doesn't have much of a choice."

Luna called her father, explaining the situation that got her to stay at Harry's place for the night.

"Alright, dear. But tell this boy to behave or I'll tell everyone of his plans to take over the world using scarred muggles!"

"Alright dad. Goodnight!" she answered happily. She was relieved. Her father could be really protective of her sometimes, but it looked like he trusted Harry.

Harry simply shook his head. Some fruit falls pretty close to the tree. Harry snorted at that when he saw himself in the mirror out of the corner of his eye; sometimes the fruit was pretty much a copy of the tree.

It was his turn to make calls now. He began by calling the minister in person, having his office keyed in his fireplace.

"Mr. Potter! You're lucky to catch me! I was working late tonight and was about to go home."

Harry had to give him that. Fudge, for once, really looked like he worked. He even looked a little thinner.

"Good evening Minister. I'm sorry to bother you, and force you to work more overtime. Something terrible happened."

"Are you hurt? Is it a Death Eater attack? Do you need the Aurors? Did you see His mark floating somewhere near your home?" asked the Minister in quick succession.

"No. But in a way, it's even worse. You'd better check out on Azkaban right now because it must be pretty deserted in term of dementors."

They were all here, Minister. On the outskirts of London. I can't be more precise because of the wards."

"I understand, Harry. But what make you think those were Azkaban's dementors? It could be a couple of rogue ones," he proposed, looking scared of the possibility that the prison with the most dangerous criminals in Britain could be wide open.

"There were about four hundred of them sir."

That shut him up. The Minister knew his numbers too. That was the number of dementors guarding Azkaban island.

"Four...four hundred? What happened?" he wondered out loud, checking Harry for any indication of a dementor's kiss. Like death.

"I kinda...chased them away," said Harry, embarrassed.

Fudge stayed silent for a full minute, digesting this. He followed a new pattern of thoughts he had discovered out recently. A logical one.

"You've never...really lied to me before, Harry, and have no advantage in doing so now, when I can easily find out if you did. I believe Albus is already on it?"

"Not yet, Minister. I contacted you first," Harry told him, serious.

"You...you did?"

"Of course! Azkaban must be secured, and fast! It's a ministry matter! The dementors must be replaced and never be trusted again!"

"Of course! Yes! Thank you Harry. I'll take care of this at once! Call...call Albus and tell him about this please."

"Yes, Minister. You'll be busy enough as it is. Thank you for your haste."

Harry closed the connection.

"Are you sure you aren't a snake with a lion's mane?" asked Luna from her bed.

"Nah, I'm Harry. Not Quetzalcoatl."

Luna chuckled and Harry threw more powder in the fire.

Dumbledore was worried about this, but congratulated him for his new feat and his quick wits.

"Fudge is a man who loves recognition and fear my shadow, alas. Showing him proper respect will strengthen our teamwork. A really nice job all around, Harry."

"Thanks you, Headmaster. I think I might have something else that could interest you. While casting my patronus, I felt the dementors trying to cover it entirely. I had the feeling that if they managed to do so, with their body and aura, the shield would have been...not really broken but more like nullified and swallowed whole."

"Yes, Harry. Such an attack has no precedent, but what you're talking about now has been reported far too many times already, bringing about the downfall of many great wizards.

"I guessed so. But what if we were to do the same? What if, by circling dementors with many patronuses, expending their aura all around them, we could nullify their aura of darkness and swallow it in a space of total light? All that would be left is the original body of the deceased wizard."

Albus looked at Harry, dumbstruck.

"Why...Harry. That is a fantastic idea. I will talk to our Arithmancy teacher, Mrs Vector, for a geometrical pattern to try such an action. With enough patronuses, we could destroy those abominations one by one!"

"I'm leaving this in your hands then, Headmaster. Don't work too late!"

Albus laughed merrily.

"This old body can still move if needed! Be sure to rest yourself! Don't underestimate the danger of magical exhaustion."

"I won't, professor. Goodnight!"

Harry closed the connection again, and turned to apologize to Luna to take so much time. He stopped dead in his tracks, as she was not even two feet behind him, waiting for her boyfriend to finish. She grabbed him and kissed him hungrily. Harry was surprised to say the least.

"I think I understand what Fleur meant by 'powerful wizard's attraction'," she said, eyes sparkling.

'Uh-Oh,' thought Harry.

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The next day, Luna held her word as they talked about death plans non-stop. He got an owl from the Minister, confirming his fear. Azkaban had been attacked and a few convicted Death Eaters were released. Like Pettigrew and Malfoy Senior. But Bellatrix Lestrange seemed to scare them the most. From what Harry learned from Sirius, she was crazy, sadistic and duel experienced. Not good. The breakout was cut short thanks to Harry's firecall, which had brought in extra Aurors.

They put the dementors back in place when they mysteriously came back, but tripled the number of Aurors on guard duty. Harry figured it would be hard for them to work in such a dark place. If the dementors turned on them, they might have trouble remembering happy thoughts. He promised himself to do something about it. Even so, he knew this would be a temporary solution. Harry had a private word with the Minister. The plan dressed up by Harry was costly, but long lasting. Harry's argument that it would be the greatest Ministerial achievement since Azkaban itself was decisive. Harry had more than one part to play, one of them to contact the Goblin nation to negotiate a contribution for the first part of the project. Seems they were very

interested in him, in a good way. Despite his young age, Fudge guessed he could give him some executive power. Harry accepted gracefully, as long as he would have "the Minister's wisdom and guidance" to help him.

After that one, Luna told him the basilisks were no longer the greatest snakes of creation. He was.

Luna helped him design and draw rune schemes all day long. With Harry's ability to carve runes, they could make his new persona over the summer. Luna was concentrating on design and eccentric pattern. Harry figured he would need an official way out of Hogwarts during the school year. They spent hours purely on the concept of Harry's weapon, over many days. Luna got back home late and came back early. She brought lunches ready to eat as they were reluctant to leave their work once in it.

The weapon had to come out as symbolic and practical. A scythe, of course. But one usable in battle. A large blade to block and reflect spells. A sharp edge, without any saw-like teeth. Simple. Handle made of oak. Traditional. Rune carved of course. Even then, such item would take a lot of energy to power up, and then to keep it active as the functions weren't 'sentient' like a shield, but constantly active. Harry would have to power it often. He brushed that matter away, saying that the Goblins had made such weapons before. They would have a way of doing this.

The costume was something else. He could not let a fifteen years old hand show from the sleeves! Much less his face. It needed to look empty. Or bony. Harry proposed to use his invisibility cloak under the costume. She agreed, but not his cloak.

"A cloak is good, when you need stealth. You would have to sew it onto yourself! It would need a glove-like pattern as well so you can hold your weapon in battle, without the danger of it escaping your hands. If it lifts from some wind, it's going to show your feet. It's not battle-fit," she countered.

"What then?" Harry asked.

"What else? You're a Rune Master, Harry. Built a leather armor with invisibility runes carved on each piece. It's going to be even more efficient than the cape. No one does it for many reasons. First, a set of invisibility runes is hard to carve. Let's exclude that for you. Next, there always is some shimmering in the light when a cloak moves the air around it."

"That's a physical reaction to the presence of an invisible object. My runes won't change that," argued Harry. He long learned to oppose her ideas and opinions every time he could. She loved it. It gave her the opportunity to have new ones, better ones. He was proved right.

"Not if the 'Death cloak' you wear over it has a set of light absorption runes. As a bonus, you'll appear as if you are always walking in a shadow!"

God, he loved that girl.

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Harry dropped his trunk on the floor of Twelve Grimmauld Place, the Black Manor. He would have to propose a new name for the place. It was still old, but it wasn't grim anymore. The lights were warm and inviting. The paintings looked quiet and noble. No more dust. No more screams.

"Welcome back, Master Potter."

And a nice portrait of a true lady to greet you at the entrance. A real home.

"Thank you, Miss Black. The house looks gorgeous. My compliment to the house elf."

A crack was heard as Kreacher appeared beside him.

"Really? You mean it?" the clean, combed and black uniformed Kreacher asked, hopeful.

Harry smiled and nodded. Kreacher jumped twice, clapping, his ears bouncing up and down. Then he disappeared. Two seconds later, he cracked back to Harry, bowed, took Harry's trunk and disappeared again.

"Quite the lively little buddy he's become," stated Harry, not expecting that much.

"All thanks to you, Harry," said him Sirius, coming out to greet him. "I really feel like Lord Black here now. How was the trip?"

"By portkey," grimaced Harry.

Sirius let out a barking laugh, clapping Harry hard on the back. He showed a crooked smile afterward that augured nothing good.

"I learned you were quite the Casanova, Harry. A small adventure with a childhood friend, a flaming relation with a French witch hottie and now you're dating a cute blond Ravenclaw. You're taking more after your father than you think..."

Harry should have known. Sirius wanted to embarrass the poor little Harry with his girlfriend? Let's see how much he can take.

"Yeah. Luna is quite cute and smart. And she fuelled a patronus able to scatter four hundred dementors to the four winds! All that thinking of hugs and kisses. She's something else, isn't she?"

Sirius was bugged-eyes learning about that small detail. He had heard of an attack that Harry drove off that alerted the Minister about the goings on at Azkaban but this!! Harry managed to humble, even if only a little, his 'wild' godfather.

"It was my greatest memory, and the most recent at that. If not, I might have thought of this part-Veela French Champion that practically raped me in my greenhouse the night of the Yule Ball, saying she had the 'urge to have this powerful wizard'. She said I had a downright Veela affect on her. Isn't she sweet?"

Sirius stopped walking totally now, mouth wide.



"Thanks god for the fly-repulsing ward I made around here, Sirius. One would have the time to get in, visit, built a nest, raise a family and die in there by now," said Harry, clearly amused.

Sirius's jaw closed with an audible snap as Harry led the way to the living room, laughing. Harry took a seat, laughing at the sight of Sirius moping a little. Even with all of his conquests, Harry beaten him flat with that and he wasn't even fifteen yet!

"Come on! Sirius! Now that your name has been cleared, you can even play the 'ex-convict' charm on witches! What are you waiting for to explore the market a little?!"

"Who are you and what have you done to my sweet, innocent Harry?!" asked Sirius, outraged.

"He grew up, Sirius. He was forced to grow up..." sighed Harry, looking nostalgic.

Sirius looked at him sadly. Harry looked back, business-like.

"I'm glad no one's here yet, Sirius. I bet the Weasleys will swarm the place when they' learn I'm here. I need the Black family connection network. I need some special stuff, discreetly. Tomorrow, we're going to Gringotts. I'll probably be there all day. You'll have to cover for my absence. Then, I need you to run an errand for me in Knockturn Alley. Forget the ladies but take your ex-con look with you."

-----

Harry was sporting a long, all-concealing cloak. He guessed he'd have to get used to wearing one. He asked Sirius to cast a notice-me-not charm on it for more precaution. Harry got out of a fireplace in the great hall of Gringotts. Sirius had come out right before him, wearing a similar cloak himself, but deliberately drawing attention. He walked out and went in the direction of Knockturn Alley. Harry walked up to a clerk and spoke clearly enough to be heard by the Goblin only.

"I need to speak with Master Riplock please."

"And you are?" asked the Goblin, unsurprised by his presence despite the charm.

"Harry Potter."

That got the attention of the clerk who froze up in an instant, looking under the hood, searching for a scar. Harry lifted it just enough to show it.

"We have an appointment." Harry added.

"Follow me."

The Goblin led him to an imposing looking office in the back, not bothering to make him wait while announcing him. He knocked once, entered and walked before the desk where Riplock was sitting behind.

"Mister Potter is here for his scheduled appointment." The clerk said simply, leaving the office. Harry pulled down the hood, cancelling the charm in the process. Now that he knew more about Goblin culture, Harry sat down on a chair, uninvited. The Goblin philosophy was: if you're expected, serve yourself! Don't make us tell you everything! It was the reason they always appeared so impatient with humans. They had to tell them everything! That grated on their nerves.

"It'll be water only, Master Riplock. I've had a good breakfast," stated Harry, getting comfortable.

The Goblin actually smiled a little and whispered something to his desk. He turned back to Harry.

"What can Gringotts do for you today?" he said, showing all teeth.

Harry froze in surprise. He was getting very perceptive about the Goblins' subtle language as well. When you talked to a clerk, he'd say 'What can I do for you', meaning that you're worth the attention of one Goblin. If he said, 'What can our accounting service help you with today', that meant you had one hell of a vault that required many

Goblins to manage. Now, if he said 'How can this branch of Gringotts be of use to you today', you have a very potent political influence on the Ministry. What the Goblin just said implied that all of Gringotts wished to help him. He figured he could start a new Goblin war if he so desired. That was kind of scary.

Putting that aside, he had things that needed to be done.

"Master Riplock. It is common knowledge that Goblin weapons are the best. That they are the ones able to live through the age, longer than their original user. I need a weapon of that calibre to bring doom down to the Death Eater's rank."

He slid a sheet of paper with crude drawing of the weapon and its evaluated spec. The runes, the materials.

"You have the talented smiths. You have the ore for that particular metal. I've got the runes and the power to activate them. Only...I noticed that despite being hundreds of years old, some weapons you made, like Gryffindor's sword, doesn't need to be charged periodically. It is either charging itself somehow, or it absorbs the wielder's power. I'm not quite sure. But it's of your doing, that I'm sure of it."

The Goblin was trying to keep his excitement down. The human was so CLOSE!!! But he could not tell him! If he figured it out, he would be able to construct another great Goblin creation! How could he help him? Edge him in the right direction?

"I understand your need, Mister Potter. I would be truly delighted to help you make something that would get through the ages...like...the Gryffindor sword...or Rowena's Circlet...or Hufflepuff's Cup...but it's a Goblin secret. One that humans like you have tried to find out for thousands of years, even going to war for it. It reminds me of that lost weapon we made, but that few are aware of. Excalibur. What was the name of that human who wielded it first?" asked the Goblin, in a conversational tone.

"It was...Arthur. Arthur's sword, Excalibur," said Harry, deep in thought. The Goblin was trying to tell him something. He almost had it. All of those creations had something in common.

"Was Gryffindor's sword ever in the hand of other owners for a long period of time?" asked Harry slowly.

"Of course! His son used it, Rodrik Gryffindor, who gave it to his daughter when his age stopped him. She was a general against us in a large battle. Lydia Bramblerock if I remember it well."

"Bramblerock? Not Gryffindor?" asked Harry, confused.

"She took the name of her husband," specified Riplock.

The Goblin was for some reason teaching this history lesson. He was checking his claws, cleaning them as if there was something special. But when dealing with a Goblin, they weren't finished until they told you they were. As simple as that. It wasn't over yet.

Harry felt his gears turning. He had all the pieces of the puzzle. Never would anyone dare to sell the Gryffindor sword. Nor Excalibur if it was ever found. Even when wielded by other people, they never became more famous than their original owner. The name never changed. It would always be...Gryffindor's sword. Because part of Godrik was in it. Unlike a horcrux, the sword wasn't sentient. Harry remembered Tom's diary. It was more like...life force. The sword's power came from Godrik's lifeforce in it, coding it to his personality. To his spirit. The lifeforce, by nature, could be charged simply by the wielder using it. The closer he was to Godrik's mentality, the closer to its full potential the sword would be.

"The Hogwarts Houses system...which puts the children together based on their strongest traits and principles...'Only a true Gryffindor can wield Godrik's sword'...That's it. He put some of his lifeforce, his spiritual tuning, in the sword. So, the lifeforce is another of the nature's primal powers, like the essence of plants that grow from inert soil and the essence of metal and crystal, static and only usable once."

Harry looked up to the Goblin and found a normally very scary sight. He was smiling hideously widely. He looked like a shark that found out that the equivalent of a turkey existed underwater.

"Mr. Potter. Follow me. We have much to discuss," said Riplock, getting up.

They went and took a cart. This one wasn't only going far down. He was going straight for an awful long time. They passed a deep tunnel and the view at the other side was astonishing. The Goblin's forges. Few were active, but the walls were stacked with full racks of battle axes, crossbows, large shortswords and many other weapons that could be used by Goblins. In the middle of the huge underground hall was a pit with something that looked like lava. It was designed like a stone well with workstations around it.

"We'll forge your weapon here," said Riplock when the cart stopped.

Harry was getting nervous. This all looked very expensive.

"Hummm. Riplock. We should discuss the fee first. I'm not exactly poor, but I don't have any source of income yet."

"Do not worry, Mr Potter. You could not pay for this weapon, even if you wanted too. Who could? Nobody can put a price on a weapon that shall become legend. It's as if somebody found Excalibur and tried to sell it a thousand Galleons. What would you say?"

"It would be revolting. Insulting. You're right. Pardon my ignorance," apologized Harry. That was the Goblins for you. Ask for a weapon, they give you a legend.

"As for the fee, we can trade a legend for another. Reputation can be legendary. What is Gringott's legendary reputation, Mr. Potter?"

"It is impenetrable. Unbreakable. None would dare try to steal from you," Harry answered confidently.

"And yet, someone tried to. He managed to get past our defences. Had the object been there at that time, the thief would have obtained it."

"The Philosopher's Stone, four years ago..." said Harry quietly.

"SEE?" said the Goblin loudly, surprising Harry by his intensity. "If ONE manages to break in, how many other will try? Since one managed it, we're no longer unbreakable. And that's unacceptable. Godrik Gryffindor was a Charm Master. The whole place is enchanted by the strongest spells of his times. The number of eternity charms he spread like candy is mind numbing! Salazar Slytherin was a Beast Tamer of incredible talent! The old dragons we have here came from him! The others are their children, raised to stand guard by their parents! Those are only two of our powerful protections. But the world evolves. So does human magic. The spells. The possibilities. To be unbreakable again, we need your talent, Harry Potter."

"You want me to ward the place with Ancient Runes in exchange for a legendary weapon?" asked Harry matter of factly.

The Goblin slowly nodded.

"When do I start?"

Once again, this frightening smile.

"I feel our business will be quite profitable, Mr. Potter."

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Sirius was walking briskly through Knockturn Alley, his hood hiding his head totally. Most alley vendors avoided him, seeing no easy prey in that man. He didn't look like some kind of lost student, easily frightened in buying some dark, useless junk in fear of being beaten up, or in hope of getting a powerful book of Dark magic that would make them into some sort of god. Those were always good for a laugh. Sirius strode into an apothecary, looking for some special herbs Harry had requested. He charmed his hood so that nobody could even have a glimpse of his face. It was a tricky spell, usually used on the whole body. The clerk went to him, expecting something special from that early customer.

"Can I be of any help?"

"Yes," Sirius answered, using the raspy voice he was used to in Azkaban, darkening the tone even further. "I'm looking for bloodroot but I don't see any. Are you out? Is this an apothecary or some stupid General Store?"

The vendor, also the owner of said shop, stepped back, wary.

"Blood...root. It's a forbidden ingredient. The Ministry does not allow its commercialisation."

"What? That's unacceptable! Then, where is your Manticore toenail? The phoenix despair tears? Strand of dark unicorn hair?" Sirius turned to search around.

"All of those are rare...very illicit products, dear customer."

The cloaked man, smelling of rotting herbs and other less pleasing aromas, got very close to the vendor's face. Sirius had worked hard to smell like Snivellus after a long day of work.

"And where...do you keep...your very rare...and illicit...products?"

The vendor swallowed hard and took two steps back. He went to the door, locked it and put the 'closed' sign on.

"Over here. Come quickly. I don't want anybody seeing us from the windows."

The cloaked man walked at his own pace, detailing with mild interest the content of the shelves. The nervous detailer held a door leading to the back of the shop open. He hushed his customer inside before closing, locking and barring the door. He rolled aside a huge carpet resting on the floor and opened a floor trap, revealing a wooden stairway leading to a small cave. There were shelves with many spooky ingredients that were mildly illegal. The kind that get you a fine and a tap on the nose. The owner pushed a brick of the rough wall, unlocking some mechanism that made said wall twist by the middle.

The cloaked man, aka Sirius, followed the herbs vendor without a wand visible, without a hint of hesitation, as if this was all perfectly normal. He might as well have turned a doorknob for all he seemed to care. Getting in the secret room, Sirius smiled. That was it. Being from a dark family, he had been initiated to the darker arts from a very young age. He walked amongst the dark ingredients, evaluating their potential. As if he was simply walking between aisles in a grocery store, he pulled out a simple brown money bag and made to count as if to figure if he brought enough.

The bulge of the bag was as big as the owner's eyes at that moment, which could have made a house elf stare in jealousy. He recognized the golden reflection of light from when a large amount of that holy metal is present. The charming sound...He hurried around, bringing up the herbs and other components mentioned earlier in sealed packages.

"You...can look around, if you want. If anything else catches your eyes, just give me a sign and..."

Sirius did just so, pointing a product or another, sometime not even caring what he put in his purchase, but loving the face of the vendor each time. The man looked a bizarre mix of joy and fear. He feared the things this customer could do with those particular herbs, and joy from getting them out of his cave. Times were hard for honest dark products suppliers. The government was hitting them hard, trying to prevent the Death Eaters from gaining an edge.

"It will be all, for now, my good man. You must have... a nice garden. I might come back. If I live to see tomorrow, that is."

The vendor was taken aback. As much by the purse the man dropped in his arms, not even counting (not even waiting for the checkout in fact), as by his words.

"Why such a grim prediction, dear customer? Could my humble self be of any help? I could, if you'd like, introduce you to some resourceful peoples that could assist you, if you are free to talk of your problem."



The vendor was sincere. So much gold! He wanted him back!

"Alas, unless you can find someone able to defeat the Grim Reaper, you can't do a thing," said the mysterious figure sarcastically.

"The dark arts have many ways to further the moment of your death, as such a person as yourself must be well aware. But let me..."

"NO!" yelled the cloaked figure with surprising strength, startling the poor specialist. "I'm not talking of a simple death! I still have many decades in front of me! I made sure of it! By such means..." he said, his voice getting quieter with each word, his hands grabbing each other.

"No, not death," Sirius resume, lost in his persona. "The Grim Reaper. I still have to figure him out. Is he a man? An Ancient? An Immortal? What is sure is that when you see him, you're going to die. I'm trying to mix something up. To bring up some defences. But I'm pretty sure I only delay the inevitable. He'll come for me."

"The...Grim Reaper?" asked his interlocutor, way in over his head.

"Yes. He seems to target the 'dark ones'," the disguised Sirius said, putting quotation marks in the air. "We who experiment with life and death. We, who are not afraid to kill to achieve our noble goals! Our experiments! I'm the first on his list right now, as I have lived a long life taking the lives of the fools, feasting on their weak life force to lengthen my own as it is our right to us, pure of blood! But I feel...no. I know that I won't be the last to be struck down. If he's on the move only now, it's because I wasn't enough of a threat. But there has been a resurgence of the dark. Like a comfortable blanket that spread over Britain, herding the half-breeds together, shivering and causing untold nightmares to the muggles. Yes...It's too bad I might not survive to see the battle between those so called 'Death Eaters' and the likely physical form that Death took."

The man grabbed his bag of dark goodies and left the shop, without another word. The vendor hurried behind him, putting his secret passages back in place, knowing this kind of customer cared little for

secrecy. As he closed the front door the cloaked man had left partially open, he ran to his fireplace. He had a lot of firecalls to make.

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Harry was amused by the Goblin's face. He had, between two fingers, a vial containing the essence of silver he had gathered from his samples. The Goblin looked at it reverently, not even daring to touch the vial, but looking as if he desperately wanted to.

"I never tried to touch essence directly," commented Harry. "I don't know what a contact with such a pure substance would do to me."

He gently pushed the vial into the Goblin's hands, which held it with utmost care. Holding it, he felt like when he was working with metals, forging it. He wasn't a great CraftGoblin himself but knew how to forge like anyone of his race. How did this young man manage to bottle what makes raw materials so powerful?

"I have essence of pretty much every metal and crystal you sent me samples of. I asked for extra vials for that reason, not because I shattered the previous ones! I need one for each metal. Do you think we could enhance the materials we'll use to make my weapon by soaking it in the essence of the same origin? Or during the making of said weapon?"

Riplock looked up at him in awe. This was...revolutionary. They could make new mixes of metals without having to care about melting temperatures!

"Errr..." began Harry, uncomfortable from the look he was receiving, and by the silence. "I figured I could use titanium for its strong nature an inability to rust but I feel it would not go well with my life force. Just a feeling I have after working with it a little. I feel uneasy with its essence. By the way, you said you'd help me to learn how to manipulate my life force to imbue the weapon."

Still more silence.

"Hum...Hello?" asked Harry, thinking he might have broken the Goblin.

The green administrator in chief finally snapped out of it.

"Ha! Yes! The...tutorial. Come over here," he said, looking at the vial all the while he reached the back of the room they were in. They were still in the Hall of the Forge but in a small building that was strangely built inside the Hall. There were many chests open. Harry saw they each contained a fixed amount of the purest ore available. In the back sat a very old looking pensive.

"This contains the procedure to life force channelling used by Godrik himself and many other great wizards. Use it at your discretion."

The Goblin's eyes were glued to the silver essence. Harry smiled and guessed it was worth the small bother to make another vial.

"You can keep it."

The Goblin's head turned so fast Harry feared he'd just snap it.

"What? Keep...keep it?" he mumbled.

"Yes. It's not a problem. I can make more of it. This is my first successful attempt at silver essence. It would be my honour if you accepted it," Harry said with respect.

The Goblin almost had tears in his eyes. He looked back at him, resolute.

"Master Potter. Anything you need, any tools, any specialists or rare ore are at your disposal. You can do all the experiments necessary in this room and I INSIST that you make a list of anything you might find of use!"

The Goblin looked downright fanatic. Harry was glad his reputation with the Goblins was getting so high but it frightened him a little too.

"Thank you...I'll do that very soon. I'll need to take the tutorial about life force channelling and experiment my compatibility with many metal ore," Harry planned out loudly.

"You can use any ore in this room!" exclaimed the Goblin, looking straight at him.

Harry's eyes swept around.

"Wow. That's a very generous offer! I won't be able to finish it all today thought..."

"You can stay as long as you want! A room will be prepared at your disposition with a maid!"

Harry was taken aback once more by his fervour, but hasn't planned anything particular for the next few days.

"Okay. We'll do it like that. I would need some parchments, ink and quills to take notes and write a message to my godfather, Sirius Black, who's supposed to come for me in the Hall of the bank in about... half an hour," figured Harry looking at his watch. It was a greatly appreciated gift from Sirius, who laughed at Harry's despair when his own new digital watch broke because of the magic in Grimmauld Place.

"I'll deliver the message personally! We'll get your supplies in the next moments!"

The Goblin ran toward the exit of the room.

'Should I say it? Wouldn't it be overkill? I'm curious...' mused Harry. He let himself be tempted.

"If you want me too, I could make you essence of a few metals of your choice while I'll be at the Forge, making my weapon."

The Goblin, who was about to pass the door, simply fell on his knees, shaking. He looked up, his back still turned toward Harry, and managed to say, in an unsteady voice: "That...would be quite nice of

you, Mr. Potter. I'll talk to my colleagues and superiors about... such a possibility."

He managed to get back up and walk away on unsteady legs.

'Wow,' thought Harry. 'They are really close to metal.'

Harry went to the pensive and got to work.

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Author Note: Hi again everyone! Thanks for the support in the DLP mess, it was really appreciated! I still want to apologize to many DLP members who felt targeted by my words, although they were not. I didn't mean to put you all in the same basket but I was still very much angered by the time I wrote that. I only spite the insulting ones. They are the ones that should be banned to make the Dark Lord Potter fansite what it claim to be: an elitist group of Harry Potter's fanfiction critics. I shared words with a few of the most serious ones and they are just that.

Apart from that, I haven't had word of my new Beta for three weeks. I'm going to disappoint a lot of people here: I'm NOT in search of a new Beta. I'm going to check the chapters myself and what comes out will be the final version. I still welcome any PM pointing out mistakes.

Disclaimer: I own this fanfic talking about Harry Potter. HA! Come with something against THAT!

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Sirius, having agreed that his house would serve as Headquarters for the 'reborn from its ashes' Order of the Phoenix, wasn't surprised to find people there when he got back from Gringotts. He expected redheads to pop up as soon as word of Harry arriving at Grimmauld Place would spread.

The living room fell silent as the cloaked figure appeared before them. He wouldn't be a Marauder if he didn't take advantage of such an opportunity.

"Give me...Harry...Potter..." he said, returning to his earlier persona, holding a demanding hand toward the small group present.

The Weasley boy paled and his bushy haired girlfriend moved closer to him, grasping his arm. Moony didn't lose a moment, whipping out his wand while Mrs. Weasley put a hand before her mouth in shock.

Sirius wanted, really wanted to, but couldn't keep up the charade any longer. He let out his barking laugh, doubling over. Remus rolled his

eyes, walked up to him and pulled his hood back. Lord Black raised his hands in defence.

"What? He isn't here? Can I leave a message?" he said, still laughing.

"SIRIUS!" howled Mrs. Weasley. "This is not funny! In these troubled times..."

"In these troubled times," replied Sirius, "we have to take all the moments that are presented to us to have a good laugh. Pranks included! Take a lesson from your own children, Molly. It's good for the heart."

Molly frowned at him.

"I'll have you know that my boys outdid themselves last year! They must have laid the pranks aside for real work! You think about it!"

"I was at work myself, Molly! But Harry's my new boss. Believe me, I enjoyed my assignment! Speaking of Harry, he won't be coming home for a few days," Sirius told them casually.

"WHAT?" was the collective reply.

"How could you leave him alone now that You-Know-Who is back?" yelled Molly. "Are you that irresponsible?"

Sirius lost all pretence of a smile. He walked up to Molly. Up to her nose. He was a good head taller than her. She simply held her head up, looking at him defiantly.

"Out," began Sirius. "Get out of my home. I'll tell Harry your words exactly. If he still wishes to see you, he'll go to the Burrow, if your own protections are enough. You are no longer welcome here."

He stepped aside, showing her the way to the fireplace.

"You can't..." she began indignantly.

"I can! Leave before I call the Aurors! You're trespassing! Leave, and think of what you said, and what motivations you had saying it!"

"But...The Order...I...I'm just worried about Harry!" Molly stuttered, beginning to realise the magnitude of her misstep.

"No. You don't 'worry' about Harry. You think you know better than him. Better than me. You think we should all obey your orders, even under my own roof, because you raised seven children. I'm his godfather. I'd throw myself in front of a killing curse for him. Did you ask where he was before calling me irresponsible?"

"I...no. Where is he?" she asked, her lips shaking.

"Safe. Now go."

Molly walked toward the fireplace, head low.

"Sirius..."

"No, Remus. Not this time. It lasted long enough. It's not the first time. But it was the last."

Molly's head sunk lower, if possible. She threw powder in the dying fire and mumbled the name of her home.

"And where is Harry, Sirius?" asked Lupin to his old friend.

"Doing his own business, Remus. I'm not at liberty to say. He'll be back in a couple of days. That's all you need to know. Now, if you don't mind, I'm still busy looking for new creatures to assure the protection of Black Manor."

Sirius walked away, leaving a depressed mood behind.

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Harry's experiments went really well. Channelling life force was tricky, as your body would naturally try to keep it in. He had to open the 'flow' in him to direct it to the desired recipient. Like... pulling the



energy in his core that his magic is build from. The 'extracting' part was the easiest as he was already familiar with it. It's almost the same way as powering runes with his bare fingers. After many trials and errors, he found the most compatible and task-oriented recipient for his needs. Dark silver. A metal mined during a new moon. Being silver-based, it's pure and light oriented, with moon properties. Being brought out on a night without moonlight, it had an affinity for darkness and shadows. Harry would be able to make it stand out, inside its own shadow. Harry felt drawn to it. It stood out while trying to hide.

Harry got all the tools he needed a matter of minutes after having asked for them. Goblins were working on the exact shape of his scythe. Harry already rejected two designs, not liking the edge and the blade not being large or thick enough. The goblins saw that as a challenge from someone who knew exactly what he wanted. They were not working for aimlessly. The third drawing brought a smile to Harry's face. The two goblin designers, seeing this, rammed each other's head together, roaring their joy. Harry found out they were reserved around humans, but quite demonstrative amongst themselves.

A large goblin with a full body leather overall came in minutes later. The smelting of the dark silver began. The blacksmith in chief told him it would take a few hours to take all the possible impurities out of the metal. Harry went to take a nap. He quickly found out they were not kidding when they said they would put a maid at his disposal. What they didn't say was that she was a very cute, about twenty years old, and very human witch in a classical French maid costume.

"If Master Potter has needs of any kind, he only has to voice them for me to obey," she said humbly, bowing low while showing a lot of cleavage. Harry almost told her he had a girlfriend already, but that would be to tell her where his mind immediately went.

"Thank you, miss, I'll remember that. I'll take my next meal near the forges in two and a half hours. That will be all for now," he said in what he hoped to be a steady voice.

As the girl left his apartments, Harry fell face first in his bed. Was it some deception he read in her eyes as she went away?

'If girls keep coming at me like this, my hormone rate isn't about to go down anytime soon!'

An hour later, he got back up, walking back to the forge. He didn't have any time to lose. He grabbed a carving pen the goblins put at his disposal and made some runes on a melting cauldron. He was working side by side with the Chief Blacksmith who was checking the progress of the dark silver melting. Harry tried his best not to be in his way. That proved to be hard as the goblin always seemed to get closer to him, looking over Harry's shoulder or sending sideways glances. Indeed, he was paying a lot of attention to Harry's work and gawked when he saw the dark silver Harry put to melt, with some lava, evaporate, leaving only a shadowy and silvery substance.

"Essence...of dark silver ore..."he mumbled.

"Don't take your eyes off the smith!" reprimanded Harry. The goblin went back to work with renewed zeal under Harry's commanding tone. The young wizard found out he liked working here, but he had little sleep until now and there was the whole crafting up ahead of him. He would have to put a lot of his own life force in the work. He had no intention of letting a mistake ruin it all.

His maid came with his meal, not caring for the heat or dust, keeping his food untouched by the floating sparks. Harry confirmed her intentions as he saw at least as much cleavage as last time, her skirt was shorter and she brushed her breast on him twice. Harry didn't want to check out if there were any other hints he might have missed!

"Thank you. I will need all my...concentration now so that'll be all," he told her, unable to look her in the eyes. Showing his back to her, he never saw her satisfied smile play on her lips. He was distracted at least!

The weapon crafting was finished in the blink of an eye and was easier than he thought. Just kidding. It was pure hell. The metal had to be hammered, stretched and bent back over itself to be hammered

back together. Harry had to put some of his life force between each layer. He took that moment to spread a thin layer of dark silver essence too. At the twelfth layering, which was the twelfth hour of consecutive work too, Harry sat down, dizzy. He was spending way more life force than his tired body could regenerate. This was getting dangerous.

"Don't let us down now, Mister Potter! We still have four layers left! You can do it! HEALER! Potions!"

Harry looked back up and saw it was already time to put in some more essence. He was doing it himself since he knew the blade by heart now. Where it was needed the most, where the edge would be...He took the padded glove and expertly put many drops of the substance on it. It glided on it, never attaching itself to it, until Harry, in one swift motion, spread it over the large metal bar. He dropped the glove and waited for the goblins to bend the metal bar again. A goblin healer came to his side and motioned for him to sit down. He examined him and handed him a few potions. After downing them, Harry got back some vigor and focus. Even then, he knew it didn't affect his life force. The goblin stood in front of him, presenting one last vial.

"This would help your life force regeneration. It will last ten hours. The side effects are to be energized beyond measure for the next ten hours. Then, you'll suffer a drop in your metabolism where you'll have to sleep for at least twenty-four hours. There is a chance you might over-energize yourself, resulting in an overload of your core and magical implosion. Or coma during the following resting period. Do you wish to take it?"

Harry nodded at once and downed the offered vial. His heart began to beat hard and he felt as if he had just drunk a concentrated version of Britain's daily consumption of coffee. He went back to work.

The last layers were done without any problems. Harry felt his life force growing fast. Maybe...a little too fast. After the last bend was made, the goblins worked on the form. The blade was curved between rolls in the circular form specific to scythes. Two wood sculptors came with the shaft ready to be mounted on the blade.

Harry felt his level of life force was climbing dangerously high. He still had many hours of regeneration to come! He would level this place with a magical surge! He had to spend it somehow... Harry began to eye the wooden shaft, and got an idea. He grabbed it from where the goblins put it and secured it on a work bench.

Then he carved. Like he never had. Feverishly. From the tip of his tool. He was like a possessed writer afraid of losing an idea, a whole novel. He wrote runes, an hour long, in spiralling patterns while turning all around the shaft or simply swaying up and down. Getting to the end, where the blade would fit, he finished the rune word, sentence and paragraph and dropped his carving pen to the ground. Shaking, he grabbed the handle and put as much life-force in it as the wood receptacle could accept. Then, he activated all of the small runes, one by one, putting more life force in them, being receptacle of their own. It took him another hour. By the end of it, he sighed. He just dodged a bullet. He still had four hours left. He hoped the blacksmiths would finish the blade soon.

Turning toward them, he saw the chief blacksmith and his three helpers put a final touch on the small, saw-like teeth at the back end of the blade, near where the handle would fit. Harry took his carving pen back and cleaned it. It was the blade's turn. Dipping the pen in some dark silver essence that was left, he began carving paper-thin runes on the metal. Harry felt the effect of the focussing potion kicking in once more. Less than an hour later, the runes were drawn. They were bigger, stronger than the ones on the shaft.

Harry took his wand and cast a fire-proof charm and a heat resistance one on his hands. Twice. Even then, he felt the intense heat as he passed his hands over the bright red blade. He infused the runes with more of his life force. He stumbled back after being done. He checked out his work.

Perfect.

Nothing was missing. He then checked himself out. He felt that his own system would be okay. No magical overload tonight. But this was the last damn time he took that potion!

Harry left the rest to the goblins. He had about three hours left of energy. He asked for smelting pots and ores. Gold, silver, titanium...He carved the pot furiously, adding extra power to the runes so it worked faster and began making essences. He did so with many goblins there simply to carry the essence away, bringing new ore and smelting pots. He did so for more than two hours. Then, he announced he would go to rest.

His maid was waiting for him, but he wasn't in a mood to feel his teenager age.

"Check on me every half hour. I'll be asleep. Monitor my heart rate and breathing and tell the healers if anything seems wrong."

Harry took off his clothes without even bothering her and went to bed. His hard face stopped her from making any kind of proposal.

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Harry, feeling as if his eyelids were made of lead, opened his eyes. A few goblins were looking at him and his maid was standing in the back, hand joined, looking at him worriedly.

"Huunn...How am I?" he managed to croak.

"Alive," stated a goblin healer, looking at a chart. "You did not fall into a long coma. That's the good news. The potion worked exceedingly well on you. We calculated you spent about three full body's worth of life force. That's why the energy drop you got was severe. Hopefully, your magical core is strong. Insanely strong, it must be. We have no means to monitor any of this, so it's a guess from here on. We forced you with potions to sustain your body and hoped you could overcome this by yourself. And you did! Congratulations!"

Harry felt like laughing. But he was tired.

"How did the weapon come out?" he asked tiredly.

"Already thinking about it? You must have some goblin blood in you..."

Two green blacksmiths carried the finished scythe to him, with reverence. Riplock was at their side, hands behind his back. He looked at the scythe, then at Harry.

"I just looked at a legend..." he said, eyes sparkling.

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Harry tiredly walked out of the fireplace. His scythe was secured in a light wooden crate, fixed in it by the handle. He took a little detour by his vault to take enough for his school supplies before leaving Gringotts. What he found there was simply stunning. His pile of gold was a full meter higher than the last time. And last time he looked at it, he hadn't bought his metal samples and his greenhouse yet. He had many, many, many more thousands Galleons than he should have.

Riplock, who was driving the cart himself, was whistling and looking at his clean claws. Harry smiled before putting some more gold in his pouch. The first sample of silver essence was a gift. The rest that he made, they had bought.

They scheduled meetings with the security supervisors to plan exactly what they wanted done as runic wards, where, and how many times. This school year would be quite busy. But it gave him an excuse to leave Hogwarts periodically, in secret, with an alibi for the Headmaster. He took the time to ask Riplock about the ministry proposal and negotiated the contract. Riplock seemed to greatly enjoy Harry's presence. Each time he came, Gringotts made good business.

Harry managed to make one slow step and a half out of the fireplace before being trampled by a crying best friend. Not Ron, hopefully.

"We were so worried! Sirius told us you'd be gone but wouldn't tell us where and didn't know how long! He chased Mrs. Weasley away because she called him irresponsible for letting you out of his sight! The Headmaster..."

"Calm down, Herms. He looks exhausted. He probably just finished doing something only he can do and spent the last day in bed, recovering," Ron finished, smiling.

Hermione turned toward him, infuriated.

"The last three days, actually," said Harry, grinning.

Hermione now looked back at him, searching his face for any trace of a joke. Finding none, she calmed down and talked quietly.

"Harry... Where were you?"

Harry bit his lips and drew the wooden crate closer to him.

"I...can't tell. I'm sorry. Maybe I'll tell you sometime but now...isn't the time."

He began walking away, toward his room, but she followed him, arms crossed. Ron was trailing not far behind.

"What was that about Mrs. Weasley?" asked Harry, not wanting Hermione to be cross with him so soon.

She looked at him in a way telling him that this was not over yet but explained the situation with her usual accuracy. In her own opinion, Sirius overreacted and she didn't hide her thoughts.

"Yes...he did," began Harry, leaning the crate against a wall in his room. "But he was right too. No offence, Ron, but your mom can be infuriatingly bossy sometimes."

"None taken," Ron replied with a knowing look.

"I'll go and talk to him, Hermione. My guess is that he already knows I'll do it and use it as an excuse to get Mrs. Weasley to come back here. But I'll do so only after going to speak with her. We cannot afford meaningless rows. Now, you said something about Albus?" Harry asked, freezing his friends in place.

"Albus?" asked Hermione.

"Yes. You know, the Headmaster?" said Harry, half-smiling, not understanding what she was pointing out.

"Since when is he 'Albus' to you?" asked Ron carefully.

Harry was surprised. Since when indeed? He remembered in the Hospital Wing when he 'thought' of him using his first name but...

"I'm...not exactly sure. We had a few talks lately and...I don't know. Something must have changed."

Hermione shook her head.

"If you say so. Now that I think of it, it's not that urgent. We'll have a new History of Magic teacher next year on top of a new Defence teacher."

"Really? What happened to Professor Binn? He wanted to enjoy the rest of his after-life?" chuckled Harry.

"That's mean, Harry. The man died once, you know," said Hermione, frowning.

"Yeah. And he liked his job so much he decided to stay a few more decades after his contract expired. It's not so bad." Harry argued. "What happened?"

"Professor Dumbledore said that someone...left a prank for him," began Ron, rolling his eyes. "Guess what? It was a mirror and a clipping from the Daily Prophet from the time he died. He finally realized his state and simply passed away."

Harry was fighting hard not to explode laughing in front of Hermione.

"It was....pffff...a very human and kind gesture o-o-of them, to help him c-c-cross into the after-life, don't you think?" he managed to say.



"Well it surely look like it filled you with something," said Hermione, crossing back her arms.

Ron and Harry couldn't hold their laughter anymore, and even Hermione couldn't help but smile.

"So, Harry. Any other kickass project for the rest of the summer time?" asked Ron, fighting back his mirth.

"Oh yes! And I'll need you both! It's a secret mission, so I can't even tell you yet! The first mission will be tomorrow, at one thirty p.m, I think. Be ready to leave at one!" said Harry eagerly.

Ron and, surprisingly, Hermione, saluted him in a military fashion.

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The Golden Trio was laughing and talking loudly when they got out of the movie theatre. They just watched 'Mortal Kombat' and Ron was stunned that muggles could fight like that. They found a bench to sprawl on to get rid of the kinks of sitting straight, facing in the same direction an hour and a half long.

"The flying kicks?" Ron asked.

"Mostly real, except the one against the lizard man at the end," explained Harry.

"The lizard men?"

"Fake."

"Fighting six armored guys at the same time?" asked Ron, dubious.

"Stretched, choreographed, but otherwise, real," answered Harry again. It was his first time at a martial arts movie too and he was impressed. In fact, even if knowing what to expect, it was his first time in a theatre himself. Between Hogwarts and his...relatives...he never had the chance.

"Could we see something a little less violent next time? It seems that all the titles are kinda...bloody," said a frowning Hermione.

"Don't worry. We'll have to. I was telling you the truth: it's our mission this summer to watch as many movies as possible," replied Harry.

"Not that I'm complaining but...are you serious? Why?" asked Ron, lost, as always.

Harry smiled and tapped his glasses. Hermione gasped, horrified.

"You didn't!" she said disapprovingly.

"I sure did!" replied Harry, joyful.

"But you can't! Those movies have rights!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Ron. "What's the deal about rights and Harry's glasses?" Then, his face lit up.

"You didn't!!!"

"Yes! And before you oppose me, Hermione, think about these copyrights. They apply to muggles by virtue of the muggle legal system. It doesn't say anything about showing this to an audience of witches and wizards. They don't know about us and even if they did, they could not even hint our existence because of the Statute of Secrecy. Meaning that they can't do a thing. One more thing. Tell me: how many wizards would have gone, on their own, to see a movie?"

"Well, the muggleborns..." Hermione began to answer.

"Most of them, from what I see, reject the 'ordinary world' once they finish their seventh year. So what? Maybe it's going to give a taste to the muggleborn of what culture they are leaving behind, and a sample of what muggles can do to the pureblood. I bet that after a year, it's going to be a part of the Muggle study program!" argued Harry.

"That would be so wicked! Harry! We must talk about this to my teacher!" Ron said, almost jumping.

"Better. We'll give him a free seat," answered Harry smirking.

"You're going to charge people?!" asked Hermione, furious once again.

"Hermione. Anything that is worth something costs something. If we do this free of charge, people will lose interest since they'll think it isn't worth anything. You think that's going straight into my pockets? Think again. I'm going to have a talk with the Headmaster for financial help to less fortunate families. Don't take it personally, Ron. But think of your case as the one that inspired me to help so many others in the future."

Ron nodded, a little bit red.

"At least, I know that Ginny will have new books in the next few years. Thank you mate," said Ron quietly.

Hermione fell silent. They got back up, stretching their backs and legs, before going to buy their tickets for their next movie. It was a vampire movie called 'Blade'. That would probably be as much action as humour for the wizards.

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The summer was going on smoothly, despite a few minor glitches. The Golden Trio, with Luna, often went to the movies and Harry was getting quite the collection of movie crystals. He had to stock up for a whole school year after all. Harry was doing pretty much what he wanted to do. Sirius had the philosophy not to worry too much if you don't have to. Remus was against the idea of Harry going outside the protections of Grimmauld place so often. Mrs. Weasley, who was back thanks to Harry, was about to start a rant the first few times but was stopped by a single look from Harry. He developed quite the steely glare. Not wishing to be kicked out by the very one who helped her return in the Headquarters of the Order, she simply asked of him to be alert and careful. That he could do. He took a few moments to

design a new trick that would help reassure her. He gave her a small mirror. It was a simple pocket mirror with roses on the frame. Mrs. Weasley was touched, and even more when Harry showed some runes he carved behind it, making it a two-way mirror.

The other glitch came from Harry and Luna who seemed to spend an awful lot of time together. Ron and Hermione wouldn't have minded too much if they hadn't left his room looking so serious. Who would have anything else than a goofy grin after an intense, private session of snogging?

That's why, one evening, while the adults had a reunion of the very secret Order, it came up while they were playing chess in the library. Well, Harry and Ron were playing chess. Hermione and Luna were reading, as they most often did.

"Why don't you want to eavesdrop Harry? Aren't you curious?" asked Ron, careful when he asked, planning his massive offence.

"The Headmaster will tell me about the interesting points at a later date," answered Harry, his eyes not leaving the board. He saw the pattern of attack forming, but that didn't mean he had a pattern of defence to stop it. The best he could do would be to try to ignore the assault to make one of his own, probably speeding his downfall by one turn.

"He will?" asked Hermione, surprised.

"Either that or he's going to get an earful!" grinned Harry, moving a piece to trigger an 'all or nothing' situation on his side.

Hermione was biting her lips, decidedly nervous.

"Harry, I have something to ask you, but please! Don't get angry!" she pleaded in a low tone.

"I'll do my best," said Harry in a neutral tone.

Hermione steeled herself and took a breath.

"You've been in your room an awfully long time lately, Harry, with Luna..."

"Which happen often to new couples..." started Harry defensively.

"You've been leaving there looking...serious and grim. You were not having some alone time with Luna."

Luna chuckled at Hermione's choice of words. Harry sighed. What good was it to hide that fact?

"I bet you noticed the wooden box in my room has been opened too," stated Harry.

"Yes," simply answered Hermione.

Ron moved a piece out of pattern, in a rather aggressive move. His face remained neutral.

"I guess you're asking yourself how come I showed her, when you and Ron are my friends since year one."

Harry played his turn carefully.

"Exactly."

Hermione wasn't sure if Harry's calm attitude was a good thing or not. Ron played another overly aggressive move, showing his own frustration.

"So...it's...unfair. Is that it?" asked Harry slowly, playing his queen in position. Ron looked, wide eyed, at the obvious trap he had fallen into.

"Well, I guess that if you could tell her, there are no reasons not to trust us!" Hermione almost whined.

"Stop it, Herm," Ron said, putting his king down on the board. "He must have his reasons."

"NO Ron! It's not because you're too afraid he'll let you down as a friend that we must simply obey and cower! He's our friend! Not our master!" she replied loudly.

"From what I know, Hermione," began Luna on a tone that was the very opposite of Hermione's, "You probably should think of him as both. I'm his girlfriend, but I don't mind being in a submissive position with him."

"What?!" squeaked Hermione, red in the face.

"Submissive. As in 'obey what he asked me to do.' What did you have in mind?" asked Luna, looking up from her book.

Harry couldn't help but smile. Then he got back to business.

"Hermione. You and Ron are the two most obvious targets, already, if someone wanted to know if I'm doing something. Can you assure me that your minds are protected against Legilimency?"

They both looked down, understanding.

"Harry..." began Luna softly, looking more focussed than either Ron or Hermione ever saw her, "It's too late already. When it all starts...if they get to them, then it's because they already know that you're up to something. There are enough indications for anyone reading their minds. The details are unimportant."

Harry looked up, tired.

"More and more people endangered. Great. We'll have to work on those mind-protective bands."

Harry got up, Luna following swiftly, taking his hand with both of hers. Ron and Hermione scrambled after them, not caring at all of the meeting in the kitchen.

Harry went in his room and they all followed him. He locked it with a simple locking charm. Then he glided a finger over a set of runes on the door frame. Luminescent runes lit up all around the room.

"Okay. We're isolated. Even Moody's eye can't see through this. But if he checked the room, he might get suspicious of why he's blocked. They might be tempted to send someone to check. If anybody does, you'd better follow what I say to do."

Harry went to the box laying at the base of his bed and pressed a runic symbol on it. He opened the light crate and revealed...the most wicked thing they'd ever seen.

"This...this is..." started Ron, unable to finish his sentence.

"This is the Potter's DeathScythe," said Harry confidently.

The weapon was about six feet long and practically radiating magic. The blade was about three foot large and ten inches wide at its middle. The blade was thick with a sharpness that made a razor look like a baseball bat. The sheer number of runes on it was mind-numbing! There were more than a hundred on the shaft alone! The weapon was incredibly beautiful and frightening. No matter how close they looked, the metal always seemed to be coated in some sort of shadow.

Harry guessed he would describe it as his friends were too stunned to ask anything.

"This was goblin-made. No, I haven't spent my vault on it. I owe the goblins favors now. Let's keep it at that. The blade is made of a metal simply called dark silver and the shaft is the core of an ancient oak tree. Yes, that's what I did that kept me away a few days from here last time. No, I cannot tell you anything about how this was made. I'm bound by honor. She's virtually indestructible. I made sure of it. I bet it can stop a killing curse. Don't look at me like that Hermione. Nothing's perfect or totally absolute. It would take a curse with more power than I put in it to break it, even partially. Believe me, that won't happen anytime soon. The edge can cut anything physical or magical that I know. It can stop spells, as I said. I don't know how to handle a scythe. But I only need to know where I want her to be and what I want done. She'll take care of the rest."

Harry proved it by making it spin at the end of his arm, at a speed so intense that it became a grey and magical blue blur, even going so far as to pass it from hand to hand before catching it back straight, with ease.

"She's built in with activating anti-apparition wards and portkey tracker. She can act as one, copying the coordinates of an apparition spot or a portkey that have been activated in a hundred yard radius. Because of the power in her, I might even get there before the original."

Hermione finally found her voice back. Hopefully, the room was warded against noises too.

"What in MERLIN'S NAME are you going to do with THIS?" she yelled.

"I'm going to kill Death Eaters, Hermione. And Voldemort. I'm going to create a legend of something inhuman that kills Dark Lords and his followers," stated Harry firmly.

He told them about the prophecy. About the horcruxes. About his decision to fight. Hermione and Ron stayed silent for once. Ron simply nodded. Hermione seemed...torn.

"You're going to...kill people. Doesn't that upset you?" she asked, surprised that she seemed to be alone to think that.

"Yes, it does bother me. But it must be done. It's immoral, but necessary. Maybe it's not a fair justice to kill them without a trial. But it would be even more unfair not to kill them, allowing many other innocents to be tortured and killed by them. Our compassion should not extend to those mass murderers."

Hermione nodded, shedding a few tears.

"But...it's still going to be so very hard on you, Harry!"



The scythe wielding teen smiled. Count on Hermione to feel sorry for someone! He was about to reply something when a light chime rang and a green bar showed on the door, climbing fast.

"Someone's on the stairs with the intent of coming in here! Follow my lead and make it real!" said Harry, grinning.

While he put his scythe back in the box, Luna sat on the edge of the bed and undid the three top buttons of her blouse. Harry sat in front of her and they started to snog shamelessly. Ron and Hermione flushed bright red before looking at each other.

"Oh well!" said Ron. "Better do what he says!"

He grabbed Hermione and sat her on his lap. She let out a quick squeal before she was silenced by her boyfriend's lips. As he began playing in her hair, she felt all idea of resistance leave her. What were they talking about again?

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Tonks was so proud! She managed to get all the way up the stairs without making one stair squeak noisily! She hadn't trip once! Moody told her that if she wasn't able to go spy on a bunch of kids to know why the hell his new eye was blocked, she would never survive this war. So, she went, grumbling. She tried to turn the handle slowly but it was locked. A wordless unlocking charm later, she was slowly opening the door. As she looked inside, her hair spiked straight up in the air, flashing neon red. Like her face. The two very busy couples, slightly moaning in each other's mouth, never seemed to notice her spying. She closed the door noiselessly, turned back and tripped on Lupin, who got god knows how right behind her, sending both of them on the floor.

Tonks, sprawled over him, slapped his chest while hushing him to be quieter when falling on the floor. She got up, took him by the hand and ran to a nearby room, shoving him inside and going in after him. She followed suit, breathing hard.

"I don't know if they heard us but I think we hid in time if they tried to check out who it was." She explained, panting.

"Tonks."

"Yeah, what?" she answered, an ear on the door.

"Care to explain to me what we are doing in a broom closet and what you saw in that room that got your hair like this? Wasn't it blue before you went upstairs?"

The metamorphmagus realized that she was indeed hiding in a broom closet, quite close to a guy she had a crush on for a while now. That sent back memories of Hogwarts.

"You really want to know?" she asked slyly.

"Well, that was the reason we went upstairs in the first..."

He was unsurprisingly cut off by the cute Auror as she threw herself in his arms, pinning him against a wall and kissing him deeply, a hand behind his head to keep him from escaping.

Hey, he asked for it...

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"Well then, Alastor. Any news of our two courageous eavesdroppers that put their lives in peril to spy on four pubescent teens?" asked the bothered Severus Snape.

"I still don't know about the kids, but after seeing what they were doing, Tonks' hair turned bright red, she stomped on Lupin and she got him in a closet, snogging him relentlessly. We can, without too much doubt, suppose that Harry isn't preparing to take over the Wizarding World right now, Snape."

Bill Weasley howled with laughter, hitting the table while Mrs. Weasley put a hand in front of her mouth. Dumbledore's eyes were

twinkling like the USA's sky on the Fourth of July. Snape rolled his eyes, annoyed.

"Count on Potter to ward a room from any spying just to snog in peace," he said with disdain. It just started a new round of general laughter.

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Then, the merry days changed location. Simply changed, not ended, since going to Hogwarts wasn't a dull or annoying thing. Harry was given free rein over the 'Projection room'. The Headmaster was delighted with his idea to fund some less favored kids' education with the money made from the movies. It was agreed that Harry would make a deposit every Monday at Gringotts, at the same time as his weekly meeting with the goblins. The account would be tied to the Headmaster's position and would last as long as someone would take care of the Projection Room.

And it was a huge success. For a mere two sickles, you could see a movie. Permanent and comfortable sofas were installed on the now inclined floor. They had racks to support their soft drinks and popcorn they could get for a light supplement. The house elves were glad to help since they were allowed to watch the movie in exchange. They sat in the front, on the floor where it was too close for a clean and comfortable viewing but they didn't want it any other way. Harry shrugged off Hermione's disapproving glare, saying he did propose special presentations just for them but they refused flat. They ate the popcorn some people threw at the screen and they were extremely happy.

Harry was still spending time with Neville now and then on their more important project. Neville knew how Harry could have a loaded schedule and he was glad to have any time he had to offer. Their main project was a dangerous one. But it seemed to be working. It could become a new line of defence all along the Forbidden Forest. After all, having a hybrid of the Whomping Willow and mandrake roots was quite a challenge. The trees would have many faces, all able to let out a sonic attack. The problem was that it worked too well last year. It attacked everything that got near it. Thankfully, it was still

a sprout and was weak. They burned it, disturbed by the howling it made when they did so. They swore to succeed next time as they never wanted to do something like that again. The new experiment they left to grow over summer was of a greyish white trunk and had a few green leaves. Three indescribable little stumps were on it, probably the growing faces.

Harry thought himself very lucky to have a few free periods more than the other students. His potion ones, namely. What he didn't expect though, were the two new teachers. They were presented at the start of year Feast. The first was a small man. A very small man. He bore more than a fleeting resemblance to Professor Flitwick. The fact that he sat at the side of the Charm teacher only accentuated the hint of their family links.

The other...was massive. At least six feet tall with a heavy muscular frame in a sleeveless black vest. He had a military hair cut shaping his bleached blond hair and his hands looked big enough, and strong enough, to crush a first year's head. He was sporting scars all over his face and arms.

"Welcome and welcome back to another fascinating year at Hogwarts!" said Dumbledore, enthusiastically. "I'd like to first introduce you to our two new additions at the staff table. First, a good hand to Mr. Adimus Flitwick, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher!"

A polite and stunned row of applause followed as the small and energetic man jumped on the table and bowed low, before taking a dueling pose and sitting back. As surprised as they were, the students laughed at this display and figured it would be a fun year.

"Now, welcome a personal friend of the end of last year's Defence teacher, Mr. Tank," said Dumbledore with some hesitation on his name. "He's going to be teaching History of Magic."

The man got up, showing his full height and spoke with a very deep voice.

"I am Henry Tank. I hope we will have a cooperative year, for your sake."

Then he sat down. For the first time ever, History of Magic became the most feared course. At least, Snape was a known factor.

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Defence was a blast. Literally. The little man loved explosions above all things and could make one with about any spell. He challenged his students to come to him with a spell he could not trigger an explosion with. They had yet to find one. A tickling charm on someone using a blasting curse can have some very interesting effects. An explosion can hurt, distract and provide hideout in the debris and smoke. The man was as subtle as a bull asking the car seller if he had the same model in red.

History was something else. Mr. Tank told them of some of his own history at first. As a Wizarding grunt soldier for the British magical army, a very selective corps, he served in many wars. There were a lot of goblin conflicts still occurring in places like Africa and South America. The man had a unique view of the war and the world. Harry was fascinated.

"Goblin wars are as much goblins as they are humans. We want as much from them as they want from us. Neither side has any right to steal the other's secrets and work. Why did I join then? Why am I fighting knowing we aren't as white as snow? They are not either. I'm a human. I fight to defend my own. As they will fight to defend their own. That's why I respect them, without expecting any respect in return. I'll teach you the view of both sides, so that when you'll be in charge of the world, you'll exchange swords and wands for a glass of wine in a conference room so that guy like me can finally become useless. But know that the goblins are only the first we are going to cover."

Harry drank in every word. He found a mentality of racial tolerance that he knew could come only from knowing those very races on the battlefield, in countries where he faced those very people. Harry

hoped he could share this view of the world, and find answers to questions he never thought of asking before.

-----

Henry Tank was a man of action. He was currently on furlough, having a temporary break from the southern conflicts. They signed a peace treaty and pulled out all fighting forces from the zones. He guessed it would last between one and five years. When it would all start again, he would be rested, and ready. Meanwhile, this teaching job would allow him to say how his heart felt about all of these wars. His superior always said he thought too much. It would be good help for him to keep his sanity.

Right now, he was planning his next courses, which is why he was walking in the Forbidden Forest. He walked a while before a warning arrow dug in the ground a good three feet in front of him. Three feet? They were awfully tolerant for centaurs.

"Halt, human. I'm saddened to say that this particular part of the Forest is truly forbidden. We might tolerate your wandering somewhere else, but not here," said a strongly built horse-man. He was, obviously, the leader.

"Then I wasn't mistaken by tracking your village over here? Good!" said Henry, grinning.

The centaur frowned. How did this human find them out? Or even track them down?

"I wasn't planning on intruding on your village. I knew you would intercept me before I could enter. I came here to meet you and propose a deal," said the fearless History teacher.

"A deal! We do not deal with humans! They are a treacherous bunch! BE GONE!" yelled another one. Mr. Tank observed that despite his yells of outrage, he never stepped in front of the first centaur. Obvious signs of submission. There was a story there...

"Wow! I want you to be part of the deal too! You're perfect!" Henry said, grinning even more.

"And what...deal...are you referring to?" said the first centaur, amused.

"If it's okay with you..." said the teacher, expectantly.

"Firenze. And the lively one back there is Bane."

"I'm inviting both of you to help me give special lessons about centaurs to Hogwarts students."

The three other centaurs behind Firenze, and Bane, who took a step forward, were mumbling, stunned of such a daring demand.

"And what would our people get in return?" Firenze asked, humouring the man. And his own comrades. But Henry knew the deal was already accepted. This centaur was really one of a kind.

"You mean, except giving you the chance to make humans respect you for who you really are instead of civilized beasts? Well, I guess I could give you a small patch of land I earned for services to my country. It's on the other side of the Forbidden forest, to the east. You know, the one circled by the mountains a little to the north?"

Firenze lost his smile and Bane yelled.

"TRAITOR! I told you! That forest was ours centuries ago before humans stole it from us!"

"LIAR!" yelled back Tank, not accepting being called a thief. "Those lands fell under the assault of vile creatures that drove you off! Decades later, we took it back by force! We restored the place and warded it against intruders! I'm offering you a way to get it back, legitimately, even to the eyes of humans!"

"I'm not going to be part of this!" growled Bane.

"FINE!" yelled Tank, arms in the air. "Then let the humans think all the centaurs are like your leader here! Peace-oriented, welcoming and soft half-horse! Easy targets! No offence, Mr. Firenze."

"I would like to say none taken, but..." replied Firenze, his eyebrow raised.

"This offer stands for two weeks. Past that, I'm going to teach the students about centaurs in my own way. And the land I talked about will stay forever out of your reach."

Henry Tank took two steps back, turned around and walked away.

"We accept, human," was heard just before he was out of earshot.

"Be there Monday, next week, at eight O'clock!" Henry yelled from behind.

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The first few weeks of term were quite embarrassing for Harry. Many people began asking questions about how he disarmed Voldemort in a duel the year prior. Some wanted to pet his dragon. Many teased him for dating Luna. Others asked him if he wanted to shadow Denis and his photo club with his Projection Room. That gave Harry an idea. He went to Denis and showed him how the projector worked. He put him in charge of the presentation. Denis was ecstatic.

Harry was doing well in Defence too, as usual. He got a bit of the teacher's love of explosions. Most of the people were leaving the classroom full of dust and coughing when Adimus and Harry ended class with a demonstration duel, the teacher laughing maniacally. It was a sight to get used to.

History of Magic was simply...awkward sometimes. The first two weeks, they had goblins guests. Upon seeing Harry, they shoved everyone aside to come and shake his hand, calling him 'Master Potter'. Even Mr. Tank was gaping at this. He knew the goblins very well and the kind of thing you have to do to obtain such respect. He wanted to know. He tried to ask. But his words dried in his mouth at



the fleeting look Harry sent him. A simple glance, a warning one. He saw those kinds of eyes before. Not from his direct superiors, of course. They were almost buddies. They came from three ranks higher than him when he asked why they were bombing this deserted mountain or this poor, quiet village. The look that says: 'don't ask, you're better off.'

He managed to let it go until the centaurs arrived. Firenze greeted Harry personally, warmly. Saying something about a 'durable gift'. The other one, Bane, was avoiding him like the plague, not even looking at him. He could not figure out the amused look the young Potter was sending Bane. As if he defeated him or something.

What was that all about?!

He thought that Harry Potter was an overblown Wizarding World figure, lucky enough to survive what no-one else did before. He was forced to admit the boy had something. Even Adimus 'the mad bomber' Flitwick seemed to like him. Henry fought at his side a few times, enough to know it wasn't easy earning his respect. He desperately wanted to clarify all of this but he didn't know if it was his place to ask as a teacher. He didn't have to. Potter came to him, two whole months after the start of term. He stayed after class and asked for a private conversation. He agreed, setting a time for that very evening, at seven. He was lucky, he told him, as he had no other plans that night.

As if he had any plans. His classes were mostly improvisation. He felt them more heart felt that way. He spent his free time trying to get foreign species to come and have a chat with his students or training his warrior body. That and Potter's Projection Room. He got hooked on muggle martial art movies.

He greeted his guest in his room that looked more like a gym than a teacher's private quarter. They sat on training benches and he offered Harry a sport's drink. Harry smiled at this but accepted nonetheless.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Potter? You seem very assiduous in class. You should have no problem at all on exams. Oh damn, that's

right. I have to plan exams at some point," said the History teacher, scratching behind his head.

Harry couldn't help but laugh, assuring him he was doing a terrific job.

"Maybe...you could help me with some personal problems...of the ethical kind that I'm bothered with. Whatever happens, this must stay here and never be discussed with anyone else, even the Headmaster. The Ministry would not like that kind of advertising either, I'm afraid, but they will gladly pat me on the back in private," began Harry, unsure of how to dive into the subject.

"Mr. Potter...Harry. I'm not under either of those two allegiances. Mr. Dumbledore is my current employer. The Magical Army of Britain is under the Queen's command, as the Ministry has proven to be corruptible in the past. If you need a vow, I'll make it." Henry smiled a little. "Unless you're preparing yourself for mass murder that is..."

The pleading look on Harry's face told him he put a finger on something he really would have been better off not knowing.

"Explain," he commanded.

Harry told him of his plans. Henry already knew about Voldemort's return but he swore he would be there on the next projection they would make of His return from the undead. To think such a young boy was to face such a heavy prophecy. Or that he would make a weapon even greater than Godric Gryffindor's sword. The way he talked about this, he already told three other people he trusted with his life to help him in his task, even if remotely and for moral support. Henry listened, took it all in and analyzed.

"When are you going to start?" he asked Harry. This later looked up, surprised.

"You're not going to try to dissuade me?"

"If that's what you came for, though luck, soldier! Your points are valid, your plan is solid and the need to clean the place from those terrorists is undeniable. Armies around the world are seen either as mass

murderers or protectors of the country. It all depends on which side you're on, that much is obvious. But armies are fighting wars as much on their own territories as in other countries. The ultimate goal is to keep the population safe. The non-combatants. You feel you must do it? That you're the only one that can? Maybe that's because you are. Seeing what you've done so far, I believe it to be the case."

Harry let out a breath. He felt better.

"One last thing. Take some Firewhisky before your first kill. It should give you the time to get somewhere private to vomit."

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Lol! I just finished re-reading all of this and I'm Laughing my head off myself. It's been a couple of month since last time I read this part! I hope you liked it!

Author Note: Not much to say! Edited Sept. 21. Enjoy!

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, but I pity anyone with that name today.

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Harry was having a nightmare. A nightmare about a door. Where was that door leading to? Where was it? He always woke up in a sweat after that particular dream. This time was no exception. A few weeks before Christmas, he went to talk to the Headmaster, not feeling good about it. He told him everything, and coupled that with an interrogation about Voldemort's current inaction. He confided to Albus that Voldemort wasn't staying in any of the major family manors. Albus was curious, to say the least; but he kept his questions in check. Harry kept his sources secret for fear of compromising them. That he was willing to share his information was enough for now. It would be best not to press him.

"Well...Harry. The reason why Tom is so silent and is sending you dreams of that place are connected, I'm afraid. From your description, it might very well be the door leading to the room in the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry building where the prophecies are kept. He's trying to lure you to get it for him, and is concentrating his efforts on rebuilding his underground network. The content of this prophecy is probably what he fears the most right now. Since your name and his are written on it, he doesn't really know what to expect from it, or from you. He might fear that it says he cannot kill you, which would explain why you have always survived in your encounters with him. I'm trying to encourage that way of thinking, despite my minimal influence on the Death Eaters."

"So...He's after it. He knows about it. Any clue how he found out?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"Yes, I know," Albus simply answered. This time, it was Harry who figured it was best not to keep asking.

"All right. So he knows about it. Does he know any of the contents?" kept on Harry.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies," quoted the Headmaster.

Harry fell back in his chair.

"Well, that explains the obsession he has with li'l old me. For a moment, I thought it was some kind of 'young boy fetish'."

"Seeing how badly he wanted to become a teacher here, in a class where he could technically subdue the students, there may be a little bit of that too," said Albus, mocking Tom for once.

Harry chuckled, but got back to business quickly.

"So... What do we do? This thing is useless now. I know of the prophecy already. Shouldn't we destroy it?"

"I guess... we could..." drawled Albus, reluctantly. "But it's working as a good decoy right now. If we destroy it, he'll guess that you already know about it and will seek the information directly from me, or you. You simply have to stay here and ignore the dream. It would be good to find a way to keep him from bothering you with those visions though..."

"Have to stay here... Do you mean that it must either be me or him that takes the prophecy from there?"

"Yes, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"Then it's perfect! We could set up a trap for him! We let it be known that we're secretly moving it somewhere else! He'll have to send Death Eaters against me to take it, or even come himself! We could..."

"No, Harry. That's too dangerous. Let's not even consider that. His allies are too strong. It would cause too many casualties."

Harry was on the edge of his seat. He looked down, disappointed.

"It's such a good opportunity!"

"We cannot afford so great a risk..."

"I know! I know... We'll have to find something else."

"Don't worry, Harry. The Order can safeguard the place. Mr. Weasley himself is spending the night guarding it," said Albus in a comforting way. It didn't have the expected results.

"Are you NUTS??" yelled Harry, standing up.

Dumbledore was struck by Harry's behaviour.

"Voldemort and I are the only two able to take it from the shelves, you know that! You told me yourself a moment ago! If he shows up, Mr Weasley doesn't stand a fighting chance! No matter what advantage he could scrape from a surprise effect! The prophecy itself says it! Only I can defeat him! At best, he's going to get a hostage, to force me to run down there and retrieve it for him! You really think Arthur is able to stay awake all night, doing nothing, after a long day's work? You're ordering him to get back home THIS INSTANT!"

Harry was angry. That didn't mean he was wrong. Albus saw the logic behind the angry tone and tiredly cancelled any guard duty over the prophecy, deciding he was really getting too old for this game.

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Harry got back to Luna that evening. He was agitated. She was concerned about him. The inclined floor of the Projection room had two purposes: to give a better view for the ones at the rear, and to provide a private hideout for Harry and Luna under the false floor. His 'Grim Reaper' arsenal was long complete. He hid his scythe in there too. He simply didn't have good enough information and resolve to act. They talked, looking at his attire on a clothing stand.

"I'm going to talk to the Minister tomorrow," announced Harry while Luna was resting her back against his chest, sitting on the floor.

"You're ready? Once it begins..." she asked simply and sincerely.

"Yeah. I know. Thanks. But we have a lull in the fighting. It won't last forever. With any luck, Tom will wait until the end of the school year to issue an ultimatum."

They fell silent, and tried to take their minds off of things, taking the advantage of being alone, in a secret room nobody else knew of. Pieces of clothing began to fall...

Luna had quite a reason to have a dreamy look in her eyes when she got back to her common room that night. The other 'Claws, used to ignoring her, missed the goofy grin she sported too.

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Harry put the last touches on that week's carving at Gringotts. Those goblins were insane! The amount of work was tremendous. Still, he had given his word. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to ward all of the vaults. He linked the majority of them to an overall security system that would be monitored by a goblin. Those simply required a few dozens runes on the doors and walls. Not a big deal. The bigger and more ancient ones were something else. They needed different, independent systems. He took the time to secure the carts against crashing and hijacking too.

The Halls were already covered by anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards. But there were some minor cracks in Godric's spells that could not be accounted for back then. He took care of that, and secured the rooms around the Halls in the same manner. Anyone who thought he would just have to leave the Halls to escape was going to have a very unpleasant surprise. Harry managed to make a combination of runes and Egyptian glyphs that would splinch someone, specifically of both his arms. Good luck at using a wand or grabbing a portkey, Dude! He tried to stay as non-lethal as possible, but couldn't keep the gloves on for some of the vaults.

One in particular was kept sealed by some strange power that the goblins had no idea of. Securing it from theft was pointless. The thing was, there was something inside that might want to get out. He had to

ward it against that. Asking what it was, to know where to start, the goblins said, in a non-angry and very respectful way, that he really didn't want to know. Really! Something that could scare the goblins...He warded the door and the walls around them with strengthening and unbreakable runes. He carved an insane amount of self-repairing rune patterns so that if something dealt a lot of damage, the wall could repair itself fully between two attacks. He asked the goblins for some big statues made of arcanite. That metal was the best container for huge amounts of magic for long periods of time. They would take decades to fully charge, sucking up a small amount of energy from the non-goblins who would ride the carts. They would power up an incapacitating net in case it got through the door, freezing any attack, and overpowered banishers every half-second until whatever it was was back in its vault while the walls rebuilt themselves.

Charging up so many runes took a great deal of his power. To put all of this 'online' later, he would need powering stones. He put many all around the place, in the waiting chairs and the floor tiles, for example. The customers themselves would help keep their money secure. Of course, they needed little power to be kept activated; only when activated would they need to recharge.

At the end of this session of work, Harry simply washed the stone dust from his hands, and cleaned his tools before leaving. (The goblins were not cheap with the tools either.) Then he met the Minister in a secret chamber provided by the goblins.

The Cornelius Fudge that Harry had before him was very different from the one he had met about two years ago. He had more wrinkles. He had lost a good deal of weight. But he held his head higher, not in pride, but in an actual sign of leadership-- the sign of a man who believed in what he did.

"Harry! It's so good to see you! We should have made this meeting public! The press hasn't seen us together since last year! You look to be in good shape, as usual! What are these working clothes for?" he asked, barely catching his breath.



Harry smiled. The politician was at his best. Since they were fighting a war where the dark side wasn't retaliating much, the game was in his favour.

"I'm quite proficient with Ancient Runes, Minister, as you are well aware of by now. I have a contract with the goblins that I can't give you the details of right now, but I can tell you the overall goal."

"Please! Call me Cornelius," he said, taking a card from Dumbledore's grandfatherly display, even if he looked a little bit wary of this 'contract' Harry just mentioned.

"Thank you...Cornelius. As I said, since my talent in Runes has been recognized by the goblins, I was hired to upgrade the security system of Gringotts. Our money is safer than it's ever been. I got them to agree to our little project too, and they'll get to work on it as soon as the plans are finished."

This news got the minister to smile as if Christmas had come two weeks early, and he had been a good boy all year long.

"That's fantastic, Harry! For the goblins to recognize your talent, you must be quite the RuneMaster!"

"It is, indeed; that's why they use the title 'Master Potter' for me. I don't mind making a small press appearance at a later date, if the goblins agree. We could inaugurate this upgrade in front of the media. However, we have a darker...more private subject to discuss today. That's the reason I asked for a private talk."

The official leader of the British Wizarding World was giving him all his attention.

"The populace might find it strange that, after the official return of Voldemort, there has been no significant increase in death Eaters activity except for the massive breakout from Azkaban. No-one has been arrested either. But they are still out there, planning and plotting our downfall, and the fall of the Ministry, so they can rise to power. They are gathering their troops and making alliances in the shadows. We can't let them crawl around in the dark unopposed. We can't let

them think that since they are hiding, they are safe. We have to do something. Something drastic."

"We...cannot possibly...put an innocent in prison now. Not after what happened with your own godfather," Fudge said tentatively.

"Of course not!" replied Harry.

"Of course not!" repeated Fudge, glad to have played it safe.

"We have to fake the death of a dark wizard that is already dead, but hasn't been made public," stated Harry.

Fudge was no fool. That was a good plan. But what would Potter get out of it?

"The hands of your Aurors will remain clean," Harry kept on. "The official story is going to be this: the falling of a powerful wizard got the attention of an Auror patrol. The house will be that of a dark wizard who has just died. Your Aurors would find the dead man and evidence of his Dark activities. They are going to surprise a figure dressed like the Grim Reaper, departing the scene of the crime. The dead wizard will be unrelated to the present Dark Lord, but you're going to depict this as a resumption of dark activities."

"You've got it all figured out," said Fudge, frowning.

"I planned most of this to happen. Don't worry. Your Aurors will see this Grim Reaper."

"Who will that be?" asked Fudge, guessing the answer.

"I told you. The Grim Reaper. You'll call him that. Don't bother with anything else."

Fudge realized that Harry had become a bigger player in the game than before.

"And where is your name going to be in all of this?" asked Fudge, dubious.

"Nowhere. That's essential. My name or even mention of me must be nil."

The Minister thought about all of this. He would get the credit while somebody else would do the job, whoever did it.

"Okay. We'll do it like that. When?"

"Tonight around ten. The house will be in the middle of London. Close enough to scare people, while comforting them that they are indeed protected. Make the Aurors patrol the eastern sections, and be wary of wards. Don't tell them any more than is necessary. Make the order come from someone else. Hide the body. Tell the press it was confiscated by the Unspeakables for further examination."

"Don't worry. We have a place where we can dispose of things when we do not want them found ever again in the heart of the Ministry. It's already eight thirty. You'd better get back to school. Your curfew is at ten I believe?"

"Exactly. Thank you Cornelius, and good night."

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It was ten o'clock. Harry was waiting, in full Grim Reaper attire, his scythe in hand. He wore his invisibility light leather armor and what looked like a dementor's cloak. In a costume party contest, no-one would have voted for him. They would have fled for their lives. Hopefully he had had a growth spurt over the summer, since a Grim Reaper of five feet and four inches tall would not be quite so persuasive...

He saw, from the top of the house he was standing on, what must be the patrolling Aurors, two blocks away. If they could have seen him from there, they might have found it strange to see the Grim Reaper spying on them with binoculars.

He jumped down from his higher perch and put his binoculars away. He came down the stairs two at a time, taking care not to trip on his

cloak. He took a deep breath, and put a finger on a rune carved into the wall. "It's Showtime," he whispered.

The overload he put into the rune fried the array, crashing all the wards down. He waited. Two minutes later, running steps were heard. Two Aurors, wands in hand, rushed in, sweeping the rooms with their magical weapons. They didn't have to go far. The sight in the living room would be enough to fuel their irrational fears for years to come.

An old man, dead, with opened eyes in a shocked face, was lying on the carpet in a pool of blood. Another man stood over him, looking calmly at the corpse. He raised his head toward the newcomers and the two poor Aurors began to shake madly. It wasn't every day you could take a look at Death.

"F-freeze! D-don't move!" said the first man, terrified.

The Grim Reaper, his job done, turned away and began to walk. The second Auror threw a stunner, which was lazily deflected by the scythe. The Grim Reaper went into another room. The Aurors ran after him. He had disappeared.

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Harry got back to his feet in his private room at Gringotts. He got out of his attire and put it all in a big, strong duffel bag. A goblin knocked once on the door and entered. He wordlessly took the bag from Harry's hands.

"Your carving clothes will be washed, Mr. Potter. You can leave your...tools... here if you wish. This room is yours, and has been warded by yourself."

He left as simply as he had entered, leaving a stunned Harry with his Death Scythe in his hands.

'Well,' thought Harry. 'This may not be the bat-cave, but I bet Batman didn't have a green Alfred!'

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The Prophet, the next morning, was sold out. Everybody wanted a copy of the article about the Grim Reaper. The Aurors needed no help from anyone to call him that. The discovery of a dark wizard in the middle of London did frighten many, but his sudden death at the hands of this mysterious entity was greatly overshadowing that small detail. Harry read over Hermione's shoulder, feigning great interest.

A drawling Draco walked passed him, leaving a single commentary.

"You're not even quoted, Potter. Already out of the limelight?"

"He can have it all!" yelled Harry to a departing Draco.

Harry forced himself to talk about it when the subject came up in conversation, saying how dangerous he must be, to escape two Aurors while under their fire without breaking a sweat. Harry nodded to Mr. Tank when he arrived in his classroom for History class, the latter looking at him intently.

Once the students had settled, the History teacher began his lecture, very seriously. There were no surprise guests today.

"Since everybody seems inclined to talk about dark wizards, we'll have it as today's subject. Harry, what is the common trait of all the Dark Lords through the ages?"

Harry didn't even have to think about the answer.

"They were all killed or vanquished, either by the forces of Light or by one of their ambitious minions."

"Correct. Twenty points for Gryffindor."

-----

Harry was shaking hands with Riplock before the flashes of the cameras. The small crowd, in which was the Minister, clapped politely. The announcement of permanent upgrades in Gringotts' security was welcome good news. To learn that they were put in place by the Boy-

Who-Lived himself was as much of a relief as a surprise. His prowess the year before hadn't gone unnoticed or forgotten. People remembered the dragon he had bested – the very same one that seemed to be following him around on Hogwarts grounds when he went to take a walk. The Prophet writers were convinced this was not a fluke. The boy had it. The readers simply believed what those expert reporters wrote. Which was, for once, the truth.

Today, the reporters wanted more than this news to puff up their sales. They asked for the cost of those upgrades, but Harry refused to give details. He simply said he'd never seen so much gold in his vault. That sent people laughing, taking notes to quote him in their article. Harry didn't see the need to tell them he had received a weapon able to challenge Gryffindor's sword in brute power, in exchange for the wards. Nope, no need at all.

Professor Dumbledore made a short speech about encouraging youth's talents, and made a small mention of the 'Potter fund for unfortunate kids', using the profits of his Projection Room at Hogwarts. The Minister clapped once again but seemed...wary, again...of Harry's new feat.

"Well, now, Mr. Potter! You're on your way to being a great figure in the Magical World! You already are, in fact. Are you going to break a new record and try to become the youngest Minister in history when you turn seventeen?" asked an all-too-sweet Rita Skeeter.

"Why wait that long?" asked Harry, raising his eyebrows.

The crowd of reporters and officials laughed heartily, this time, over his last reply. Harry took a bit of his seriousness back and resumed talking to Rita, even if the Minister felt that the words were directed at him.

"I'm sorry, but I'll leave that job for people more experienced in the political game. I'm not patient enough to handle such a position. I intend to be a simple RuneMaster, who makes the average wizard's life a little easier with affordable inventions, and a little funnier world with prank material I was hired to design for Weasleys' Wizing Wheezes."

Polite laughter this time. The Minister recovered his smile. Of course, Harry knew he would have to clarify his position in private. He could not have Fudge planning his fall behind his back. He simply had to convince him that he'd rather target the huge income of money instead of political influence and power. After all, he was already friends with the current Minister of Magic...

Two hours later, Harry walked alongside Fudge into the Ministry building. They went into a private conference room where more people were awaiting them. Fudge took a seat at the end of the table. Harry took a simple seat on the side. Miss Hopkirk, of the Underage Magic Department was on his right. The wizard responsible for the Floo network was facing Harry, and Riplock was at his side.

"You have me intrigued, Mr. Potter," said Fudge. "Once more. The recent events were most surprising. I never expected such an alliance with the noble goblin nation," he stated, bowing his head toward Riplock.

In the dry way of his kind, Riplock simply stated, with a small nod: "You are quite right, Minister. The goblin nation will support Mr. Potter in all his actions, seeing that his motives are quite profitable to us and have already been lucrative."

Harry thanked Riplock before gaping faces all around. They had all half-expected the goblin to deflect the subject at best, or even to straight out deny this. They had always been neutral at the very most!

"Minister," began Harry. "I am here today to ask for the Ministry's help. I want some actions to be approved by you personally, but that would only be revealed at the last possible moment."

"What you're asking for is very dangerous for...the Ministry, Harry. We cannot afford to lose any credit or the people's confidence at this point. They must feel safe," said Fudge, as diplomatically as ever.

"That goes without saying, Minister," answered Harry. "But what better way for people to feel safe than by actually being safe? If the number of dark manifestations, already low, is reduced to next to

nothing, and any Death Eaters are captured or disposed of, without any losses on our side, they will not only feel safe, but protected. I need a few things to do just that.

"Why the secrecy then?" asked the Floo network director.

"Because most of my actions are going to offend the morals of many for being wrong, and dark. Deep inside, they'll cheer me on," said Harry. "That's why my actions can be revealed only when most of them have been completed. They might protest some, over the manner of action, but they'll be glad that the decisions have been made for them. They'll secretly admire a government with the guts to do so," Harry said with assurance.

"I can see why I'm here, Mr. Potter," said Mrs. Hopkirk with a light frown. "I see the need to have the trace on your wand removed but..."

"Yes," Harry cut her off, nodding. "The trace on my wand is a reason I asked for you to be here, Mrs. Hopkirk. I need an official discharge of the underage tracker. It will be up to you to find a loophole in the legislation to amend that. Since we began with this matter, let's pursue it."

The ministry administrator frowned. How dare this young man think that he could boss her around? Hell! That demand sounded more like an order!

"As you all well know, I now have Voldemort's wand," said Harry, showing it for everyone to see.

People around the room shivered as much from the name as from the sight of that wand, which had killed so many.

"What you have to ask yourself is: who is using Harry Potter's still-tracked wand right now?" he asked, knowing the answer was kind of obvious.

Mrs. Hopkirk put a hand over her mouth at the implication. How could she have missed this?! Everybody else had wide eyes, while Riplock



simply smiled. This young man was good at business. He knew when to take control with one well-placed bomb.

"I see you have made the connection, Mrs. Hopkirk. I'll need you, or someone of confidence, to check on my record since the end of last year. Any use of magic from Tom Riddle should have been recorded. The only reason you are not missing any owls right now is because Voldemort must be behind wards that prevent them from getting to him. Though I would like to see his face, receiving an owl stating he can never set foot in Hogwarts again because of underage magic..."

The joke was lost as everybody else was too absorbed by the serious matter. Too bad.

"We have to monitor the spells cast with his wand with great attention. It could give us an indication of his next move. And of when he leaves the wards," Harry said clearly.

Mrs. Hopkirk could only nod dumbly. Why hadn't they thought of this yet? Probably because they were too afraid to spy on Voldemort. As though he could reach them through the scroll where the 'infractions' would be inscribed!

"Now, to the matter of the Floo network," the young Gryffindor kept on, turning toward the representative of that branch of the ministry. "I need a few places linked. A private fire that would allow only certain people to pass. I need a connection to the Hogwarts groundskeeper's hut. I need you to design a special Floo powder, too."

The representative was all business, and didn't waste time in protestation over Harry's right. If there had been anything wrong with his request, the Minister would say so.

"Private, password-coded fireplaces are an easy way to solve your problem. What do you need the powder to do?"

"I need one able to force-Floo someone into somewhere that is protected by such a private password-coded fireplace, but that are known by the Ministry to exist."

The man looked at him seriously.

"What you're asking is onerous and akin to property trespassing," he stated.

"Can you do it?" simply asked Harry.

The Floo network director turned toward his boss, Minister Fudge, who was glad to be given a word in all of this, and nodded. The director turned back toward Harry.

"We'll do what we can."

"Excellent. Mrs. Hopkirk. Let me give you this," said Harry, handing her a small mirror. "It's a two-way mirror," said Harry without missing a beat. "I'll keep the other one on me at all times. Contact me at any sign of a located spell cast by my wand."

Mrs. Hopkirk took the mirror and put it carefully in her purse. This being said and done, Harry turned back toward Cornelius Fudge.

"Minister. You should propose a new law stating that anyone conclusively convicted of supporting a dark-oriented organisation, will be condemned to life imprisonment in Azkaban, or death; and shall have their monetary funds and property..."

Cornelius' smile grew. Yes! He would finally pass that law that would fill the Ministry's chest to the brim!

"...confiscated, to support the repairs to the collateral damage this war will bring. To aid the families of the fallen and restore the public and private properties that might be destroyed," finished Harry, frowning as he saw Fudge's smile disappear.

Riplock took great pleasure in speaking his view on the matter.

"Since the users of those funds won't have the opportunity to spend it ever again, I guess this is doable. We'll consider them as deceased, and apply standard Will procedure for the succession. If the users had no direct family, then the contents of the vault would go directly

to fund those stated measures. Giving it to one person or organisation would be unthinkable, as it would side the Goblin Nation to the party to whom we would grant access to that money. Allowing it to be used by the whole Wizarding society, of which the goblins are, of course, part, is acceptable," finished Riplock, grinning.

The Minister seemed to swallow something rather nasty. Harry smiled, taking back control.

"Isn't it impressive? To see such involvement of the Goblin Nation in a united society should strengthen our bond as a whole! It would alleviate the burden on Ministry resources to repair everything Tom Riddle breaks in his little pureblood tantrums."

Harry was having so much fun, making Voldemort sound like a petulant child.

"I guess we all know what to do now," said Fudge, getting up.

Hands were shaken, sealing the decisions made. Walking back toward the Floo fires in the main hall of the Ministry building with Harry, Riplock spoke without turning his head.

"You know, never before have the goblins been, even remotely, part of Wizarding society."

"Wouldn't you like to put all of those wars behind you, to mingle more amongst humans? For business? For entertainment? To have shops in Diagon Alley like anyone else could? To offer an opportunity to younger wizards to understand you? It all has to start somewhere..." Harry mused out loud, pictures running in his head of a world where he could buy an ice cream from a goblin in the street.

"It has... the merit of being considered," admitted Riplock. "Tell me, were you serious when you said you don't want to run for the Minister's job once you turn seventeen? We may not have voting rights in your government, but we can influence the choice of the population. Say... by hinting that with you in charge, we would feel more confidence, and would lower the interest on mortgages and

loans for a house by one percent? Believe me, you would reach the thirty-five percent vote on that alone..."

Harry smiled widely. Didn't the saying go, "Only fools never change their minds?"

"It has...the merit of being considered..." he answered, taking a fistful of Floo powder.

-----

Harry, as he often did, went to see Sweetie that evening. Harry was amazed at her intelligence. It was truly midway between a human and a dog. He didn't feel her presence in the back of his mind or anything of the sort. The female dragon hadn't learned to speak, and neither of them could read minds. He didn't spend hours trying to tame her to learn tricks and bind her actions to his will. She simply...understood when he spoke. She understood when he told her that he didn't like what she just did, and that she'd better never do it again. A simple pressure from his leg sufficed in flight to indicate where he wanted her to go. She had never mistaken him adjusting his position for an order yet. They could simply read each other. Harry found that to be utterly cool. He was getting to be best friends with a dragon, knowing exactly when to scratch her on the snout to make her purr like a V-eight engine. She wasn't a fire-breathing monster anymore. She was his Sweetie, with a protective streak.

Hagrid was never happier to be the groundskeeper. He even integrated Sweetie into his course. With Harry's help of course. There was no sense in taking risks. He learned at least that with the Buckbeak episode.

Harry decided he would go flying awhile with his pet, and let her snack on a secondary spider nest that had been biting the centaurs' butts from too close lately. He had Luna with him, who was eager for a romantic spider hunt on the back of a ferocious dragon with her boyfriend. Harry didn't doubt the attraction that power had on women anymore. Until now, it had served him well. If Luna got a kick out of it, all the better!

Luna had been introduced to Sweetie for a while now. Her total lack of fear helped her quite a lot to be accepted by Harry's pet. Luna went to Sweetie, scratching her neck, asking her if she was hungry and itching for a flight. She let out a happy roar, stomping lightly, two legs at a time, bouncing like a puppy.

"Harry! Hi ther! Do ya have a secon'?" asked Hagrid, coming out of his hut at the noise.

"Sure do. But let's make it quick, Sweetie seems eager for a ride."

Hagrid turned his back to the castle and handed Harry a brown, unmarked envelope.

"Someone told me to give you that. He insisted that I not tell you that it was him that gave this to you...That he gave it to me to pass it on to you...anyway. He said you'd reckon it's from him. If you don't, I'm still ready to tell ya," he finished in a whispered tone of voice.

Harry opened the envelope. It was a simple sheet with a drawing and names. Two circles were around the form of a dark skull, made of two long, twisting snakes. There was a smaller circle in the middle of the bigger one. Harry recognized the names written all around the small circle.

Severus Snape

Lucius Malfoy

Barty Crouch Jr.

Bellatrix Lestrange

The outer circle had many more names.

McNair

Crabbe

Goyle

Rookwood

Pettigrew, who escaped Azkaban at the same time as Bellatrix.

Stan Shunpike? The Knight Bus helper?

And many more...

That was crystal clear. The inner and outer circle of Voldemort's followers. There were notes on some, describing them as ministry workers, like the secretary of the vice-minister. A guy named Lavoy. Another was a paper-pushing Auror named Turner. Another, Welch, was...oh shit. Working at the R&D section of regulation of the Floo network. Harry never saw any need to give a two-way mirror to the Floo Director. His own mirror was rune-controlled to be able to receive calls from multiples sources, like Mrs. Hopkirk, Mrs Weasley, Dumbledore, Sirius, Hermione and Luna. Now he wished he had given one to the Director. He would have to go and give one to him in person tomorrow. The spy must know of the project already. He couldn't be excluded from it or it would look suspicious. They would have to plan for him to be somewhere else when the testing phase was near. They couldn't have that project fall into Voldemort's hands! The fireplace that would be placed in Hagrid's hut was scheduled for installation in only two days! He would have to skip classes tomorrow.

Welch would have to be the first real target of the Grim Reaper. It unsettled him, realizing he would finally dirty his hands.

"So...do you know who sent this to you?" asked Hagrid, looking eager to tell.

"Yes. I know. Thanks Hagrid."

Oh yeah, he knew. Who else but Draco? He had done a tremendous job. He gave him targets. Luna, followed by Sweetie, walked up to him. His pet moaned, feeling the mood of her master.

"What's the matter, Harry?" asked his girlfriend, concerned.

"Reality won't give me a break. That's what," he answered, his head low.

He turned toward his pet who looked at him with her version of the puppy eyes. Anyone else might have mistaken it for a death stare.

"I guess you'll have to give us quite a ride to distract me, Sweetie..." Harry said, smiling sadly.

Moments later, a few students looking over the forest saw a dark form, as fast as a centaur's arrow, spewing fire while doing loops over the trees. Some high-pitched screams could be heard all the way to the lake.

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Harry put on the last piece of his invisibility leather armor. He put on his ragged cloak, looking more ominous than ever. His personal maid was holding his scythe for him. She seemed to struggle with the weight a little. She was shaking. Looking at her face, he saw her shaking some more. It was not the effort then. Even seeing him changing, she was scared. He took his scythe with one hand, freeing her of the burden. He went to his fireplace and took out a small log, barely twice the length of his palm. This was the result of the Floo Network Research and Development team. Harry had warned the director of the department just in time. The spy was an active part of the project, the 'Breaker Log'. It was a form of compressed, magically charged Floo powder. It created a bigger fire that would burn stronger as the log would take more time to consume – at least ten to fifteen seconds.

They were lucky, though. The spy wasn't aware of the designed use of the log. That would have betrayed his new persona even before he would begin to put it to use. He was blissfully unaware of Harry's private fire connection too, with the possible exception of the one at Privet Drive. That one was protected with the rest of the house, but what if Voldemort got his hands on the log? Would it still be safe? The man had to be dealt with.

Harry threw the log into his fire, talking clearly.

"Welch residence."

The fire roared to life, and didn't die down. It grew in intensity and soon, half the room was engulfed in cold flames. Ten seconds later, they turned green. The connection was established. His protections must be minimal. The Grim Reaper stepped into the fire and closed his eyes for the duration of one bumpy ride. It wasn't designed for comfort. Feeling the end of the trip, Harry simply put one foot in front of the other and calmly walked into an unknown house. He realized absently that he didn't fall in a heap like he always had. The trick was very simple. You have to walk out of the fireplace. If you stay still, it'll throw you out. As simple as that.

A man rushed into the living room, his brow furrowed, wondering who could be coming in at this hour, unannounced. Seeing the Grim Reaper, he almost peed on himself. He turned around, a look of deep panicked concentration on his face. He fell to the ground, his feet no longer attached to his body. It looked like the splinching runes on his scythe were working well. Harry got a vial out of his cloak.

Getting the recipe for veritaserum had been child's play. He only had to add a few new essences to his collection to make it. Sirius did get him most of the "unusual" ingredients on his trip to Knockturn Alley. Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror department, was made aware of Harry's 'rogue agent' status too when he requested the recipe. He seemed hesitant to let a young boy handle that kind of work, but obeyed on the Minister's order.

Approaching the man who was trying to crawl away, Harry pinned him down by stomping on his leg with the back of the blade. It looked painful. Harry was feeling sick. For now, all he saw was a ministry official trying to escape the dark creature he had become.

"P-p-please! Whatever you want, take it! Please don't kill me! Please! I'll do anything you ask!"

Harry bent over him, striking the ground at the side of Welch's head with the shadowy weapon. The man instinctively protected his face with his arm, closing his eyes. Opening them again, he looked at the



vial the Grim Reaper presented him. It was crystal clear. It looked like water. He took it, his hand shaking.

"You...you want me to drink this?"

The Reaper nodded slowly.

"Is...is it poison? Will it kill me?"

The cloaked figure shook his head in negation. The man gulped, figuring he would have a better chance at living if he'd obey. He closed his eyes and downed the content of the vial. He was soon filled with calm and the pain in his legs receded. The four drops of top-quality Veritaserum in the vial made sure he wouldn't resist.

"What's your name?" asked Harry in a raspy voice.

"Tony Frederic Welch."

"What's your job?"

"Employee at the R&D section of the Floo Network."

"Are you a Death Eater?"

"Yes."

Harry paused. That was it. It was official now. He still had many question to ask though.

"Is Voldemort aware of the 'Breaker Log'?"

"Yes."

"Does he have enough information to make one?" Harry asked, growing worried.

"No."

Harry let out a shaky breath.

"Does he have any samples?"

"No."

He wasn't a minute too late. The man would have learned that the Log had been completed today, probably at his next day's work.

"Have you ever killed?" Harry asked, resuming the interrogation.

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes!"

Harry didn't think it was possible that so much emotion could be shown after taking veritaserum. His was as pure as it could get. But even through the haze of the potion, the man seemed eager. His chances of survival were slim to none.

"Who are your...favourite targets?" asked Harry, deciding he could determine how fucked up he really was.

"Muggle men."

"Why?"

"They aren't true men. They are muggles. I like to hear their screams when I cut off their limbs, showing how helpless they are when faced with a true man."

Harry made a grimace under his mask. What a sick moron. Was that the only way this banal ministry worker could feel superior to anyone?

"What are Voldemort's plans right now?" kept on Harry.

"Preparing a massive attack, thanks to the Breaker Log."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Damn. That guy was a tool. He wasn't from the Inner Circle after all. Probably he was expecting a promotion over this. What now?

"Do you know of any spies that have been Imperiused?"

"One. Percival Weasley."

That sent a chill up his back. He knew Percy had a strained relationship with his family right now. In fact, he had even moved out, and was in the process of cutting off all communication with his family. He seemed to be against most of his father's views concerning the war, being amongst the few that refused to admit the return of Voldemort. That and the lack of ambition his father displayed. Harry now saw that the change was caused, or amplified, by an Imperius.

"Why Percival Weasley?" Harry asked the drugged man.

"He's the butt-monkey of the replacement of Barty Crouch senior. By putting some competence and ambition in his skull, he will replace his new superior when an 'accident' will happen to him."

"What else about Percy do you know?"

"He's totally unable to fight off the Imperius. To such an extent that he really thinks his actions come from his own will. He received a compulsion to get as far away from his family as possible so they don't notice, and to get some credibility amongst the higher-ranked purebloods."

"What do you know about prophecies?"

"I don't know of any."

Well, that was it. He would get nothing more from him. Harry emptied his mind, straightened his back and swung his scythe hard in front of him, blurring his vision on purpose. Even then, he could not help but look afterward. He had just chopped the guy at mouth level. The cap

of the head rolled on the wooden floor ridiculously, spinning blood in its path, ending up showing the lower part of his brain. Harry turned around and went back to the fireplace. He took another small log and turned the grey ashes into a full roaring fire.

### "Grim Reaper's Lair"

Then he was off. He landed in his private room in the depths of Gringotts. He put his scythe on a stand near the fireplace. Harry began to walk toward the bathroom, but finished the trip running, feeling the bile rise. Harry was thankful nobody was there to assist at the scene of the Grim Reaper being sick after his first kill.

-----

Harry was pale the next morning. He was at the breakfast table, barely touching a hot cup of coffee. He was absorbed in a thick tome about Ancient Runes theory. So dense was the theory that no runes were even shown. It was pure concept and purpose behind a rune word. He had to find a way to do this! He didn't care if most experts said it couldn't be done! Luna looked up from her table, but didn't go to speak to him. Ron and Hermione looked at him with worry. What was wrong? After the first period, they were about to ask him plainly as he was now beginning to bump into people, so distracted was he. Of course, seeing whom they had run into, most people apologized before getting out of Harry's way, but that was not the point!

When they were about to question him about it, Luna appeared out of nowhere, walked steadily between the two of them, arms extended, grabbed them both and pushed them into a secondary corridor. They let themselves be led, more like dragged around, really curious. Luna looked so sad...and determined.

"Don't. Don't talk to him about this. Don't ask a question. Don't look like you want to know or even that there is something to know about. Be oblivious. Do this for him. He has to brood over it, to replay what happened in his head a thousand times. Then, when he's ready to crack up, that's when he'll need his friends, and his girlfriend. If we try to comfort him right now, he's going to feel guilt for not having brooded enough!"

Hermione looked at her, confused for two whole seconds. Then her eyes opened.

"He...was out late last night, wasn't he, Ron? I haven't checked the paper this morning..."

"Yeah, but what does that change?" asked Ron, as thick as ever. Then, his brain kicked in. It was a feat in itself.

"How do you know we should do it like this?" asked Hermione.

"He's the heavy guilt type. And....I know what it is to feel the burden of the death of someone," she finished, looking away.

Hermione simply hugged Luna, purely out of reflex. She felt Luna hang on to her loosely. She was only fourteen, after all. They cried silently while Ron stood aside, his back turned. He had to fight tears himself, thinking about Luna's and Harry's similar burden. He began to understand what Harry had said about him being so lucky to have his family.

At the end of the day, Harry slowly walked out of the castle, taking the path to his greenhouse. Luna was following him, not so far behind.

Ron and Hermione stayed in the Gryffindor common room. However long it would take, they would wait for him to come back. So, time began to pass.

Ten.

Eleven.

Midnight.

One.

Two.

Three.

At four in the morning, Ron and Hermione were taking turns staying awake. The portrait finally opened. And closed. Harry came out from under his cloak. Ron nudged Hermione to wake up, which she did with a start. Harry was surprised to see them both still there at this hour. His face was mostly still pale, but he had red eyes and cheeks. There were distinct signs that he had cried his eyes out for a while.

Without so much as a word, Hermione got up, went to him and pulled him into a hug. Harry wasn't surprised much. What did surprise him, though, was Ron, who put his arm around his and Hermione's shoulders, pressing his head against theirs and tightening the group hug. They set aside the macho confidence and the teen shyness at the contact of another man. They were united in support of the founding member of their small circle. They stayed like that for a while, and Harry wondered at how much he really depended on them. More than he had imagined, it seemed.

"I killed a man yesterday," he whispered, afraid to dirty them simply by uttering the words. "I just...swung my weapon and cut his head in half."

The group shuddered. Ron was the next to talk.

"Why did you kill him?"

"He was enjoying killing muggles! Dismembering them! He..."

"Then you did well," simply stated Ron, applying more pressure on Harry's shoulder. "You did well. And I could not be your friend if you reacted any other way than you did. Don't lose faith in your actions and motives. You did well."

Harry nodded, letting out a breath, shuddering. After a while, his tired legs could not support him. They moved to the sofa, breaking the circle. They talked until morning. It was only three hours away anyway. Then they went to breakfast. They didn't eat much, but Harry felt like drinking a part of the ocean. His body felt empty after shedding all those tears. They looked at the Prophet. They hadn't missed the news of the man's death. His body was found in his

apartment after he had missed a day's work. They found a Dark Mark on his arm. The murder was associated with the Grim Reaper.

They went to class. Luna glued herself to Harry's side the entire day. She even missed a class to hold his hand while he was attending History of Magic. Mr. Tank, having read the paper, didn't say a thing. Or maybe it was because he didn't know all the students' faces yet, and didn't notice there was one more.

The Gryffindors knew there was something up, but they had long learned by now not to mess with Harry. His goblin contacts, his Ministry friendship, his fighting back against the Dark Lord, his magnificent Projection Room and his pet dragon were enough reminders that you didn't mess with the scarred boy.

Harry worked restlessly the next day. On the week-end, he went to the Ministry. He knew the ambitious Percy would be there, trying to prove himself worthy of a higher position. Harry's presence at the Ministry was somewhat commonplace by now. People greeted him and wished him a good day. He went directly to the Ministry Law Enforcement division. Percy was no Auror, so he had no chance of running into him. But there was still someone here who could check whether Percy's Imperius was still in place or not: the paper-pushing Auror. Harry would have to work fast and with discretion. He went to the office of Rufus Scrimgeour. He had never had the time to talk extensively with him, but he hoped he would be receptive to his plan. The Head of the Department greeted him politely, inviting him to take a seat. Harry was in no mood to beat around the bush.

"Voldemort is preparing a massive attack. He wants to access a protected place by using the 'Breaker Log'. His plans were thwarted since the Grim Reaper got the spy, and managed to get from him that he didn't have the time to deliver it to his Dark Lord. Tom will find another way, that's for sure. The Grim Reaper learned that someone in your department is keeping an Imperius on another rising Ministry worker."

"Who?" simply asked Scrimgeour, sounding alarmed.

"Percival Weasley. He cannot fight the Imperius at all, it seems. We cannot confront him right after this visit, or someone might make the connection of how we found out about this. He must be given the means to fight back himself."

"What do you propose?" asked the Head Auror, guessing that Harry wouldn't have come there without some kind of plan. He wouldn't have gotten Fudge in his pocket so easily if he were all empty talk.

Harry made sure no-one could see him through the windows of the office.

"They are charmed not to show anyone inside," the Ministry official assured him.

Harry took a small parcel from a pocket and handed it to him. Rufus opened it and found what look like a thin leather armband with a single symbol on it.

"That's the sign of the Law Enforcement Inspectors. Why on an armband? And where did you learn of that symbol at all?" asked the confused official.

"Tell Percy that he needs experience in the field. Tell him this band will give him the temporary authority of an Inspector, and to keep it hidden except in case of necessity. He'll never let go of it. On the other side are carved another set of runes. The Imperius can only be stopped by the mind of the victim. That armband can't block it, but it will drain the pressure on the attacked mind, and let him keep his will and self-awareness. It will give him a fighting chance. Since he's going to be fighting in his own mind, he should be in a position of superiority. It's going to be up to him to defend himself, faced with an angry Auror Death Eater."

"He doesn't stand a chance," said Rufus confidently, shaking his head.

"Even if it's an Auror who hasn't seen the field for more than a decade, and does paperwork all day long? Who at his age, should be retired by now? Percy is young, and spent a portion of last year at



Hogwarts, getting back in touch with his fighting skills as a teacher of the DADA course."

Scrimgeour ignored the confidence in Percy that Harry had. He was solely focused on the description of the Auror Death Eater.

"You don't mean..."

"That's one arrest that you can handle without the Grim Reaper. The armband has a powered protego charm on it, triggered by the next Imperius that will be cast on its wearer. It can block up to six minor curses. Maybe two major ones if he's lucky. As usual, it's useless against any Unforgivable."

"Thank you, Harry. For helping me to make my department secure," said Rufus, sincerely.

"It's war, Mr. Scrimgeour. It's not a full-blown battle yet, but we can't let them strike first. We have to keep them unbalanced by cutting the support right from under them," Harry said, getting up. "Wait a few days. Wait until he does something worth some attention, and present this 'promotion' to him, saying that you have to recruit everybody that looks worthy. He'll never suspect a thing."

"That was exactly what I was about to do, Mr. Potter. Don't worry. I'm not exactly helpless." said Rufus, smiling.

Harry got a little red in the face.

"I didn't mean to..." Harry began to apologize.

"Save it for someone irritable. You're doing your best to prevent the worst. I can see that now. Keep up the good work. And tell this...Grim Reaper...that we found rather disturbing and disgusting evidence of Welch's Death Eater activities. He would have been condemned to the Veil anyway."

Harry nodded wordlessly and took his leave. 'One problem potentially solved,' he mused. But he was gravely mistaken if he thought his day would be over so fast. He had skipped a Defence class to come here.

He had to use his 'official route' to travel. The fire in Hagrid's Hut was to be used only for his Reaper activities. He managed to keep this secret from Hagrid by telling him that maybe his pet would have eggs someday...

When he got back to the castle after Flooing to the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade, and riding his broom from there, it was well past the start of second period. He waited for third period to return to class, but he never got there. He was pulled by an invisible force behind a suit of armor while no-one was around. He had his wand drawn even before completely disappearing from the hallway. The mysterious aggressor finally returned to the realm of the visible, looking pissed off. It was a Malfoy kind of pissed; which was fitting, since it was Draco. He looked afraid, panicked and angry. Not good. He whispered harshly, close to his face and totally ignoring the threatening wand.

"What are you doing, Potter? No sooner do you get my list, than one of them gets a new haircut at the jaw line! Is that how I'm supposed to trust you with the fact that my father is amongst them?"

"Are you traceable from that list of people?" frowned Harry.

"Of course not, dimwit! I still have my cunning ways. That is not the point! If you gave that to the Grim Reaper, he's going to kill my father!"

'So...that's what this is about,' thought Harry. Maybe he could get more out of Draco. He didn't like it, but if he played this well, they both would get something out of this.

"Your father seems to be the most hardcore Voldemort follower of them all. Quit wincing already! Learn to say his name! Or at least stop making that face when hearing it! You know, I heard your dad did some pretty bad things in the previous war..."

"It's not...like that," said Draco, turning his head to the side.

"Then how is it, Draco? He's on the Reaper's list. It's only a matter of time. To be frank, he was on his list well before you passed me that

piece of paper. He got wind of the project to bring about Voldemort's return last year. Your dad had a starring role in it, remember? So what about it? Did you think your father was just an innocent victim?"

"Shut up! You just don't understand how Slytherins work!"

"Then tell me," answered Harry, getting impatient. No matter what Draco said, Lucius was at the core of this, and guiltier than most.

Draco combed his hair with a hand and took a deep breath.

"Mock me over this, Potter, and it's over. I'm going to the dark side. Understood?"

Harry's eyebrow shot up, but he nodded nonetheless.

"We... are not fighters like Gryffindors," he began, unsteadily. "We are the cunning. We follow the strongest among us, the winning side. That's how we make sure of our survival: by making alliance with the strongest. We will shamelessly betray them if they prove to be losers. We don't care much for reputation. But, in a way, that's all that matters to us since we all want to become leaders. So, we're the purebloods. The influential; the rich; the nobility. From what I've gathered, it was all working pretty well until that guy came and ruined it with his totalist ways."

Since Harry didn't say a word, only listening intently, Draco kept on, a little bit more assured.

"Guess who now has to lodge him in the most luxurious rooms of the most ancient mansions, providing exquisite food, robes and other onerous supplies? When the guy has no money at all? Who would question him? He's way too powerful. So, they all follow him, some with real zeal. He gives them the chance to realise their sadistic desires. He brings out the worst in people. Now tell me: when have you seen my father put his words into actions? I can admit it, Potter, right here and now. We, the Malfoys, are all talk. To act would mean to take responsibility. To choose a side. We don't want to! Any side we choose, we'll lose. If we go to the Ministry, taking that much money from the Dark Lord's pocket, he'll kill us all and make sure it's

someone loyal to him that inherits! The Ministry is less likely to do that. That's how we came under the Death Eaters' banner. But we are not his soldiers. We're banner holders. We're holding it up, so to speak, so that our hands are too busy to do anything else. But the Dark Lord is always suspicious, and trusts nobody. So he's always demanding proof of loyalty. So, yes, my father killed. He tortured. It was him or them. He chose to save his own life."

Draco held his head high, finishing his tirade. Harry realized a little bit more of what it was like to be in the snakes' den. Only they would be proud, and hold their heads high, after saying they were bloody cowards.

"I see," Harry said, pondering. "I guess you have one last chance to save your dad."

"Which is?" asked Draco, more than a little suspicious.

"He has to turn himself in, along with your mom. I can arrange for them to be detained in secret Ministry cells, guarded by Aurors instead of rotting in Azkaban. He would have to tell all he knows. Then there would be a trial. The Ministry cells are the safest place for them right now. I can make sure they are well treated and even negotiate a pardon for cooperation and having surrendered themselves. I can deal with the Minister himself. Since you'll still be on the outside, Voldemort will keep access to his money, so he should not actively hunt them down."

"You want me to throw my parents in jail?" asked Draco, unbelieving.

"Temporarily. Do you know where the Ministry cells are?" asked Harry.

"Probably in the Unspeakable Department," shrugged Draco. "Somewhere in the Ministry building. Why does it matter?"

"Because I know you're wrong. To prevent help coming from the outside, it's protected by multiple Fidelius Charms with unknown secret keepers. I know where it is since I'm participating in its creation on a common project with the Ministry and the Goblins. I'm going to

be warding it myself. Your parents won't have the stress of risking being killed by Voldemort," Harry assured him.

"Really? Is it really better to spend your life in jail? Ask your godfather!" Draco replied sarcastically.

"He was surrounded by dementors, twenty-four seven. I expect to vanquish Voldemort before I'm out of Hogwarts," said Harry confidently.

"How...How can you be so sure?" asked Draco, confused.

"Neither Tom nor I has much patience. We'll end up at each other's throats soon enough," shrugged Harry.

"You have no proof, no assurance of victory," said Draco.

"I have the Grim Reaper. From what I've heard, he won't buy your father's excuse," said Harry, thanking his stars that Draco was no Legilimens.

Draco bit his lip. He knew he could not get anything better than this deal. There was always a price to pay.

"Your position toward Voldemort will get stronger, too, as you will be the sole access to your family fortune. Be cautious. Play the survival card. Tell no lies. As you said, he always knows..."

Draco nodded.

"I'll make contact with my father. Make sure you can pull it off on your end."

Draco hurried out from behind the armour suit after disillusioning himself once again. The third class period had already begun. It was incredible to Harry how missing class seemed like an insignificant bother when he was playing with the life and death of people between periods.

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A little less humour than usual, but things had to get serious somewhere. Who's going to be the Grim Reaper's next victim? Stay tuned...

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